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MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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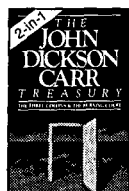
by Ann F. Woodward

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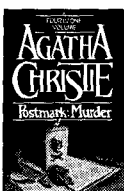


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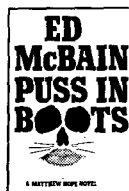
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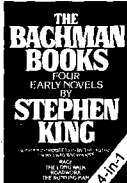
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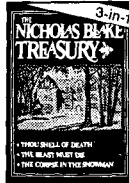
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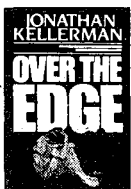
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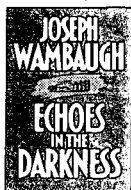
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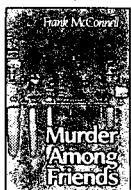
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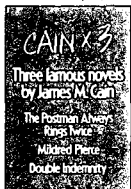
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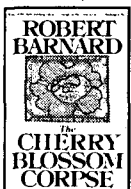
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

My Summer Vacation, or it wasn't exactly a pilgrimage, but since we were in the neighborhood . . .

The waterfall made its presence known in the most startling way. It wasn't just another waterfall in this place of dozens of them, splashing down the mountainsides wherever one looked, it was a torrent, visible in the top half of the mountain until it seemed to end in a cloud of mist about halfway down; the rush of water was both thick and noisy. And there was a strong sense of isolation and danger about it on that hot summer day, perhaps because there was no one else around, or so it seemed, just the two of us confronting it across a field and a highway at the edge of

the little Swiss town of Meiringen, where we had come by train from Interlaken, and, later, a ticket-taker, a gray-haired, black-browed gentleman in uniform who drove the funicular, and a young couple, perhaps local people, who spoke no English.

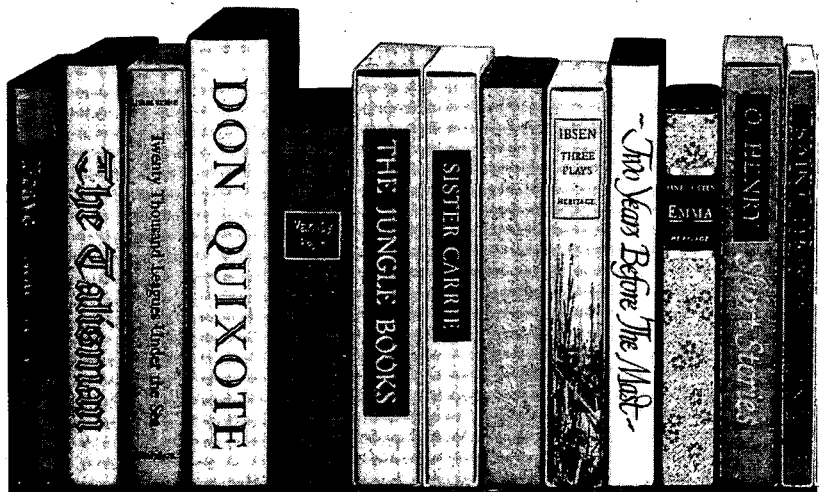
Thus it was apparent from the beginning that Conan Doyle had in fact chosen an unbeatable spot for the final struggle between Holmes and Moriarty. It wouldn't have been a bad spot for a Hitchcock movie, either. All that silence, except for the ceaseless roar of the falls, all that empty heat, and then the slow, steep rise on the funicular through cold dark green wet woods. And at the end, a vi-

(Continued on page 140)

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Signature _____

Best of Luck!

by Vickie Dubois



Flit. Flit. Flit. Thunk!
Adelia Quirk's blue-veined fingers sifted through the morning mail. It rapidly formed two stacks. One, in the center of Harry Fendley's walnut desk, contained bills, notices of upcoming auctions,

and a few other odds and ends that might interest the owner of Fendley's Used Cars. The other stack, on the bottom of Fendley's round metal wastebasket, contained junk mail, flyers for some even-more-interesting auctions, and an in-

invitation to a political supper honoring the local congressional representative—the same fellow who smiled down from a chrome frame on the wall with a brotherly arm draped around Harry Fendley himself.

Harry would be sorry to miss that, Mrs. Quirk thought with satisfaction, a smile twitching her thin lips.

Adelia Quirk was a slight woman. The translucent powder on her ivory skin and the muted lipstick that faithfully recreated her fading lip line were concessions to her age and station in life, not vanity. Her thin gray hair had been permed and stood fluffed up, something like a dandelion puff.

She pushed her reading glasses back up the bridge of her thin nose and considered the title to a '79 Buick. A flick of the wrist and it too went spiraling down into oblivion. She felt positively giddy with excitement. She ventured a quick glance over her shoulder and made certain Harry Fendley wasn't lurking about—he was very good at lurking.

Three more missives rapidly joined those on the desk. The last she frowned at thoughtfully. The address was neatly printed. There was no return address. It was somehow naggingly familiar.

Her thumb savaged the flap

of the envelope. She realized why it looked familiar. She'd seen dozens like this during the thirty years she'd worked as secretary at Endicott High School, before she had retired last spring. With a disgusted sniff, she balled up the paper and tossed it.

"MRS. QUIRK!"

The shout, delivered from about three feet behind her, had the intended effect. Mrs. Quirk jumped as if brushed by a live wire. She reached down, groping for the edge of the desk for support. Her heart had given such a mighty leap it had to be still for a few seconds before it could continue beating. When it did, she turned a baleful eye on her tormentor.

Harry Fendley smiled. "Mrs. Quirk, you mustn't throw away letters from my constituents. That might be from some good citizen with a problem." Harry Fendley was president of the County Board of Supervisors and a fat cog in the local political machinery.

Harry dived into the wastebasket, puffing as he bent over his great cauldron of a stomach, and rummaged about. Mrs. Quirk watched in fascinated horror, then sighed with relief when he came out with the crumpled letter—nothing more.

Harry Fendley made little puffing sounds as he straight-

ened. He was a short man, round with a shiny bald head. His baldness was acutely emphasized by great dark brows that crawled up and down his forehead above little chinquapin eyes. He smiled benignly. He couldn't help smiling—a boa constrictor couldn't help flicking out its tongue.

I need to increase my Valium, Mrs. Quirk thought, her knees still shaking in her support hose. Maybe Fendley should take nerve pills, too. I could share mine . . . a couple of dozen in his coffee would do wonders for my nerves.

"Now, Miss Adelia," he said as he sat behind the wide desk and began to uncrumple the letter, "you're a good secretary, but you don't understand politics. Never throw away a letter before I see it—no matter what kind of crackpot it's from." He shook his head as if chiding a slow child. A look of concern formed on his features, his eyebrows crawling together above his pug nose like two black fuzzy caterpillars kissing.

"Why, you look pale, Miss Adelia. You are feeling all right, aren't you? Working to pay off George's IOU's might be too much for you. After all, it wasn't your fault George took to gambling—and was so bad at it. Many a night I told him, 'George,

quit this playing cards and go home to Miss Adelia before you get yourself into trouble.' But he just wouldn't listen. Too bad he didn't have more life insurance; a real lack of foresight.

"I really am concerned for you, Miss Adelia. Why don't you stop being so stubborn and let's settle this thing. Eight acres is really too much land for a widow lady like yourself to keep up and, well, I don't want to scare you but you really ought not be alone way out there at night. Now, why don't you sign your house and property over to me, and I'll give George's promissory notes to you . . ."

Because I'd rather torch it first, worm! she thought indignantly.

When she didn't reply, Fendley turned his attention to the letter trapped beneath his pudgy paws. His eyes followed a few lines and he looked up with a delighted smile.

"Mrs. Quirk, have you any idea what you were throwing away?" Not waiting for her answer, he tilted the page to the light and read:

"THIS LETTER IS NOT A JOKE. IT WILL BRING YOU EITHER GREAT LUCK OR TERRIBLE MISFORTUNE. DISTRIBUTE THIRTEEN COPIES OF THIS LETTER WITHIN FIVE DAYS . . ."

"It's a chain letter, Fendley." Mrs. Quirk cut him off impatiently. "The kids at school were forever passing these good luck, bad luck . . ."

"Just make thirteen copies, Miss Adelia. Don't you know that we have to share this good fortune with our friends?" Fendley pushed the paper toward her, then sat back like some benevolent Buddha, steepling his fingers over his paunch. "Let's see . . . send a copy to Robert Barnes."

"The man who ran against you in the last election?" Mrs. Quirk asked in surprise.

"Yes, the very same. And send one to James Hollingshead, the mayor of our fair city . . . one to Leroy Jacobs . . . and one to his wife Evelyn, too . . ."

Mrs. Quirk eyed him with something nearing appreciation as she jotted down the names of a dozen of his political and personal enemies, as well as a former secretary. The man had a highly developed sense of pettiness.

"Close the door on your way out, Mrs. Quirk. I'm expecting a friend and I don't want to be disturbed."

As she entered the outer office with its large plate glass windows, Mrs. Quirk spotted a young couple outside circling a dinosaur of a station wagon

that had been crouched on the lot for a disturbingly long time. They wore the look of fish determined to be hooked. Since the other salesman hadn't come in yet, Mrs. Quirk saw her duty. She marched out and informed them that Mr. Fendley didn't want to be disturbed.

As she made her way back across the graveled lot, she thought that the sun shone a little bit brighter . . . the wind had a little less chill in it . . . a good deed had been done.

"The trouble with Harry Fendley," Mrs. Quirk muttered as she sealed the thirteenth envelope, "is that he wasn't still-born." And that had been rather shortsighted of his mother, considering how he'd turned out.

Mrs. Quirk sat a little straighter in her chair and made a mental note to be more kind. The truth was that she just didn't like most people, and she'd found most people were kind enough to return the sentiment.

There were exceptions. It was sad, but true, that she didn't enjoy such a relationship with her neighbors. They all seemed determined to like her although she'd always gone to pains to be herself around them.

The trouble with the Andersons, whose three acres of scrub-pine flats wedged between her property and the Red Mound

National Forest, was that she'd known them both since they'd been having accidents in their pants. They both tended to treat her with the same indulgent affection they might bestow on an eccentric but harmless old aunt.

On the other side of her property lay five acres of flats, denuded of pines, that belonged to the Effersons.

The Effersons were a special curse—back-to-the-earthers. Not the stick-to-themselves survivalist branch of the family but the hearty gee-look-what-we-did-today group—always running over with homemade jams of exotic origins, goat cheese, or cucumbers which had been subjected to strange rites and packed into jars labeled *Pickles*. For all that Mrs. Quirk had made a point of being herself with them, they were as difficult to put off as a pair of frisky puppies.

On the other side of the Effersons, dividing their property from more of the national forest, was the Chickasaw River. Beyond the Andersons was Wooten Creek and more of the forest. This stretched into a vast unpopulated tract on the other side of the interstate highway. Mrs. Quirk knew that she was in no danger of a neighborhood mushrooming up there, for what the Department of In-

terior owns, no man taketh away.

Behind Mrs. Quirk and her neighbors another vast tract of pine forest stretched for miles. This was owned by Acme Paper, Inc., a notorious landgrabber snatching up any unguarded morsel of land while refusing to sell an inch. This, though more pleasant than a subdivision, was not as nice as if it had been part of the national forest. For, every decade or so, the trees were clear-cut and replanted—in rows. Rows of pines were an offense to the human eye.

Of the three parcels of land, Mrs. Quirk's was the prime property. It was the high ground between two flood flats. The Chickasaw River on one side and Wooten Creek on the other periodically flooded their banks. Mrs. Quirk's house stood on a long, raised finger of ground, a ridge carved by the southernmost edge of a glacier millennia before and weathered round. Her place stayed high and dry.

Harry was up to something, and she wasn't so much of an old fool that she couldn't guess it involved her house and land. If only she could figure out why he especially wanted *her* land.

She knew Harry hadn't offered her this job just so she could pay off George's debt. He'd offered it to her, accompanied by his favorite cam-

paign smile, to soften her up into signing over her deed. Harry had great faith in his powers of persuasion; after all, he was a used car dealer.

A Brooks Brothers suit, carrying blueprint cylinders, disappeared through the door of Harry's office. Mrs. Quirk wondered, were they blueprints, or land survey maps? She listened at the door. Nothing. No sound. Harry had probably had the walls insulated against long-range listening devices—and nosy secretaries, she decided with a snort.

Actually, Mrs. Quirk was a bit ashamed of all the fun she was having. She'd had little to occupy her since her retirement. Then George had died, and had surprised her for the first time in twenty years. She'd discovered, after the funeral, that the Wednesday night prayer meeting he'd faithfully attended the last few weeks of his life had actually been a high-stakes card game in the back room of the local bar. Fendley held promissory notes from George's losses, all duly signed and witnessed. Fendley hadn't, of course, been directly involved in the card game—gambling being illegal.

Strangely, she wasn't angry with George. The truth was that she'd been rather pleased to find out he'd had the gump-

tion to sneak around and do something—not that she wouldn't have put a stop to it if she'd found out.

She knew that, by law, she was obliged to pay. She also knew that Harry couldn't legally take her house away.

Nope, he sure can't, thought Mrs. Quirk complacently as she began to tear stamps from the brass stamp dispenser. Judging from the way Harry had been more and more impatient with her refusal, time must be running out for whatever he was cooking up. Mrs. Quirk pulled the thirteenth stamp from the dispenser, and her natural frown deepened. She lifted the lid: empty. There was only the one stamp left, and one of the chain letters—and the corner of her utility bill stuck out of her purse.

She glanced from one to the other. Of course it was really no contest. She tossed the thirteenth letter beneath the tray in her desk drawer, passed the last stamp across the tip of her pink, pointed tongue, and affixed it to her electric payment. As much as sending a bad luck chain letter to one's enemies appealed to her, one had to maintain perspective. After all, it was one thing to appreciate Harry's well developed sense of pettiness, but quite another to buy one's own stamps.

Adelia Quirk cast an uneasy glance at the lowering clouds as she waited for the light to change. Since the weather had worsened a few days before, the crisp, sunny cool of fall drearying into the damp cold of winter, Fendley had developed a passion for the news—or rather, for sending her arthritic joints across the street to buy a newspaper. Even though she'd wrapped up in her heavy wool coat, the buffeting wind knifed through. It made her nose runny. Damn Harry Fendley. He probably hoped she'd step in front of a semi.

The light changed and she started across, after checking the speeding Peterbilts.

Harry had become even more short-tempered with her the last couple of days. He definitely wasn't the Friendly Fendley she'd come to know and loathe. She judged it wouldn't be long before he would deal on *her* terms. Of course she could more easily decide what those terms would be if she could find out what he was up to. But he'd also been more secretive the last few days, and she'd had little time to pry.

The business had taken an upswing lately. There had been more customers on the lot than Fendley and the other salesman could handle. Mrs. Quirk

had barely been able to keep up with the paperwork.

As Mrs. Quirk pulled out the newspaper, the first large drop of rain splattered atop the rusting yellow vending machine. A moment later another drop sideswiped her nose. She uttered a rather imaginative rudery as she hurried back to the corner.

Later, as she thought over what had happened next, Adelia Quirk realized that she'd known—somehow—that the brown and tan pickup wasn't going to stop. It hadn't been moving that fast, but it had rolled right through the red light. James Hollingshead's Lincoln *had* been traveling fast. As mayor of Endicott, he had ignored the traffic laws with impunity for years.

He was not, however, immune to the laws of physics. Both he and Robert Barnes, driver of the pickup, were declared dead at the scene.

It was a scene Mrs. Quirk could still see vividly that evening as she sat soaking her feet in a tub of warm water. She hunched over with a bright granny-patch afghan she had crocheted from odds and ends of yarn wrapped around her shoulders. She held a tissue pressing her nostrils together against a persistent snuffle as the warm water seemed to soak

the chill out of her bones. Whenever her lids closed, drowsily, the scene replayed until she became so irritated that she banished it from her thoughts.

She had known the two men well. She knew everyone in Endicott well. A useless waste of human life, she decided, the both of them. Neither of them was worth a damn. Still, it was an unfortunate accident.

Probably mechanical failure, the officer at the scene had hazarded. Barnes had obviously tried to avoid the crash. The pickup's brakes must have failed.

The telephone rang. Mrs. Quirk eyed it with some displeasure before answering. "Hello, Virginia," she said without enthusiasm, upon hearing her sister-in-law's voice. "I guess you want to talk about the accident."

"What accident?" was the reply. Mrs. Quirk could have bitten off her tongue. Now she would have to spend half an hour going through the details again. She was spared when her sister-in-law went on: "Oh, you mean the Jacobses. It was no accident. Leroy meant to shoot her!"

"Shoot her—who?"

"Evelyn. He shot Evelyn—and that insurance salesman she'd been slippin' around with. The whole thing was so tacky. Leroy

would leave for work at seven thirty and the insurance man would be at the house by eight. Evelyn would never even get out of bed. Only, this mornin' Leroy came back."

"I don't want to hear about it. So please don't tell me what Leroy said when they arrested him—and how many minutes of coverage the TV people gave it on the six o'clock news . . ."

"Leroy didn't wait for the police," Virginia interrupted, then said, somewhat subdued, "He shot himself, too. Can you imagine? That, and the accident on Main Street—you did hear about the accident on Main Street?"

"Yes." Mrs. Quirk rolled resigned eyes heavenward.

"And Johnny Hovatter getting drunk and falling off one of his horses and breaking his neck?"

"What? When did that happen?" Mrs. Quirk asked.

"Really, Adelia, you should keep up with what's happening around you. It was in this morning's paper." Fendley's newspaper had ended up serving her as a rain hat. Her own morning *Clarion Herald*, which was delivered somewhere around one P.M., had been thrown, with her delivery boy's unerring eye, into the only mud puddle in her driveway.

Virginia's voice rattled on.

"For a town of no more than twenty-five thousand a lot of things have happened. Now, if we were New York, or somewhere—but that's what I was calling you about before you started questioning me about those other things—when are the Effersons moving out? Do you think they'll go back to New York—that is where they're from, isn't it?"

"The Effersons? They wouldn't sell out. Just a few months ago a Clarksville man was trying to buy . . ." Even as she said it Mrs. Quirk was remembering that it had been some time since they had trotted over bringing huckleberry jam or goat's cream. Cucumbers were out of season.

"They didn't sell. Frieda Wilson's daughter, who works at the courthouse, said at the beauty parlor that there was an error in their title going back sixty years. The rightful owners had them served notice. They did offer them a small cash settlement in exchange for their promise not to challenge the thing—which would have been useless anyway from what Frieda said . . ."

With a patience that amazed herself, Mrs. Quirk bore the remainder of "what Frieda said." When the subject matter rambled on to what Frieda's mother was paying to have her house

painted, Mrs. Quirk reminded herself firmly to be kind. Virginia couldn't help it if she was an idiot.

After she'd hung up, Mrs. Quirk called the Effersons, who confirmed the news. It seemed the old farmer had sold their five acres of river frontage on the Chickasaw to a logging company some sixty years before. The logging company, a fledgling business, had had a falling out over payment with the farmer, and he'd reclaimed the property. The trouble was, he hadn't bothered to straighten it all out at the courthouse. The logging company hadn't gone out of business. Today it was known as Acme Paper.

"When did you find out something was wrong?" Mrs. Quirk was drawn to ask.

"I had a bad feeling a few months ago when a survey crew was shooting the lines for the paper company and they didn't stop at my back fence," Gary Efferson explained. "The foreman showed me his plat when he was finished sketching, and it made my stomach curl.

"We found a home for Zelda, though," he went on. "That's some comfort. I think we might try building a soddy in Wyoming next . . ."

When Mrs. Quirk hung up the phone, she felt angry. However irritating the Effersons

could be, they were *her* Effer-sons. She didn't like this turn of events, not one little bit. Now there would be five more acres of pine trees planted in rows.

At least they'd found a home for Zelda, the goat who made the cheese. She only hoped that it wasn't with a family that liked barbecued goat.

The whole mess was still on her mind when she arrived at work the next morning—until she was greeted by a broadly smiling Fendley.

"I've sold that blue Buick, Mrs. Quirk. Here's the people's name and address, if you'd get the paperwork started . . . ?"

"You can't sell that Buick, Fendley. The state will revoke your license if you sell a car without proper title."

Fendley waved her away airily. "The cleaning woman found it stuck to the bottom of my wastebasket. God only knows how it got there."

God or someone, Mrs. Quirk grumbled to herself.

She really wasn't paying attention when Fendley went on to tell her about the new salesman he'd hired to keep up with the crush of customers. She felt as though the world plane had taken a slight but definite shift to the left, and she was a little off-balance.

That sense of wrongness grew later, when the mailman told her about the town alderman who'd been electrocuted by high voltage wires while putting up a TV antenna early that morning. And how another man, passing in a car, had happened to see the accident and had rushed to help—only to die, too, when he'd tried to jerk the man free of the antenna pole.

As he said the name of the second victim, Mrs. Quirk realized just what had been niggling at her. Both were from Fendley's chain letter list—as were the people who had died yesterday.

Mrs. Quirk sat down heavily at her desk. It really was an ugly coincidence. Sending people chain letters didn't make them die, a very logical part of her mind argued. These people did, came the reply. Then, why not Fendley? Fendley had gotten the original—the ones she'd mailed were only copies.

She suddenly remembered the almost unbelievable upswing in car sales—and she remembered the wording of the letter: great luck or terrible misfortune . . .

Fendley, smiling viper that he was, hadn't broken the chain. What if the people he'd sent the letters to had?

Mrs. Quirk felt slightly ill—and completely culpable.

My God! She had even enjoyed the idea.

"Fendley, we have a problem," said Mrs. Quirk as she entered his office without knocking. He glowered at her, then hung up the phone without even saying goodbye to the person on the other end.

"Yes?"

"Fendley . . . Harry . . . I don't know any other way to say it . . . Harry, people are dying."

He regarded her as if she had just declared that the world was round. "Miss Adelia, people die every day."

"I mean, Fendley, the people you had me send those chain letters to are dying!" She named them. "*Seven*, Fendley, *seven* people have died."

He blinked owlishly at her. "It's just some odd coincidence." But the look on his face glowed with possibility.

Mrs. Quirk didn't like the effect her revelation had on him. Gleeful was the word that sprang to mind as she watched the strange light dancing in his eyes. She felt slightly ill.

"Fendley, I don't know what you can do—but for God's sake, do *something*!" she said sharply.

Black fuzzy eyebrows crawled upward in response. "What?" he asked reasonably.

"What?" What indeed. Mrs. Quirk had no answer.

The strange light in his eyes

suddenly encompassed her. "Miss Adelia, are you feeling all right? You seem a little disoriented this morning. I talked with your sister about you a while back, and she was a bit concerned." His new tack was obvious.

She pinned him with a bright blue eye that had nothing of senility in it. For an instant his smile faltered. "A competency hearing?" she asked, a sardonic brow quirked above the frames of her bifocals. "I'd love it. Then—" she smiled thinly "—I wouldn't be responsible . . ."

It seemed to Fendley that her last words hung on the air long after she'd left the room.

Minutes later Mrs. Quirk was leaving the office with her personal belongings in a box under her arm and a potted geranium in her hand. On her way out, a pert blonde, whose sweater fought mountain and valley to no avail, stopped her in the doorway.

"Do you know if there's an opening here for a secretary?" the blonde asked hopefully.

Mrs. Quirk thought she could be forgiven for dropping the geranium on the woman's foot.

For the next twenty-four hours Mrs. Quirk sat in her living room and drank enough hot black tea to put the high-pressure TV ads for denture cleaner to the test. All of her consider-

able will was focused on disbelieving. When she called the mortuary, she was rewarded to find that business had lulled. No one else in Endicott had died.

No sooner had she replaced the receiver than the phone rang, and she found that the local animal population had not been so fortunate. The call was from Coleen Anderson, her neighbor, who confided that she had been receiving rude phone calls for the past month that had grown increasingly threatening. There had also been prowlers at night. Then, last night, three dogs had been left on her lawn, their throats cut. Coleen had broken into sobs.

Mrs. Quirk decided that it was time to call a war council. An hour later, the Effersons and the Andersons were bending near as she unrolled her own survey plat on the kitchen table.

Greed, thought Mrs. Quirk later, was what made the world go round, and Harry Fendley's world spun very fast indeed these days.

It was the next morning that she heard about the fire at Emilio's. The restaurant, which occupied a building used as a warehouse in the forties, had been a favorite dining place in Endicott. A great many

diners had been inside when the flames broke out. There were seven victims of the fire.

As the news announcer gave out the names of the dead, Mrs. Quirk got out the list of letter recipients she had reconstructed and grimly struck four more from it.

Eleven. Of the original thirteen, only two remained alive. As far as she knew, they were still alive. One, John McLean, was the half-owner of a rival car dealership. The other was Fendley's former secretary. With bile lapping at the back of her throat, Mrs. Quirk gathered her purse and coat and went out.

Hartley and McLean Auto Sales, situated temptingly just beside the interstate frontage road, was a much finer operation than Fendley's. They sold new cars as well as used. Gleaming new units sat row on row, while brightly colored plastic pennants snapped overhead in the crisp breeze. The used car section was a neat display of choice late models, sold with warranty. The only thing that Mrs. Quirk noted missing was customers. Inside the plate-glassed showroom, four salesmen were deep into a bridge game.

She found McLean in his office, throwing darts at an old campaign poster of Fendley.

There were a great many holes on Fendley's nose. However, at the moment, his aim seemed to be off. He couldn't even land a facer.

He looked around as she plunked down in a chair. "Mrs. Quirk! I thought you were dead!" He didn't seem unduly pleased to discover his mistake.

"And I see you're still the same vicious little hellion who used to sit in the outer office at school waiting to be paddled by the principal about once a week," she snapped back. She was tired.

"You were a lot more frightening than the principal, Quirk." He laughed, then shot his final missile. It seemed destined for Fendley's ear but dropped suddenly just before impact.

"What can I do for you?" he asked as he sat down behind his desk.

"I'm not dead," Mrs. Quirk said with utter seriousness, "but you are, unless you can do something immediately." McLean sat silently as she told him what was happening, the expression in his eyes changing from shock to disbelief. Even before he spoke, Mrs. Quirk knew that she'd wasted her time.

"Yeah, I remember something like that in the mail. My secretary threw it away. So what am I supposed to do, make

thirteen copies and send them out? And then what's supposed to happen to the thirteen people I send copies to?" he asked, rocking lightly back and forth in his low-backed swivel chair.

Mrs. Quirk felt as though a fist had connected with her diaphragm. Of course! Why hadn't she seen the danger before? If McLean sent out his copies, then what was the fate of the people he sent them to? And if those thirteen sent out their copies, then it would be thirteen times thirteen in danger. There *was* no escape, she thought as she rose on wobbly legs.

McLean burst out laughing. "Tell Fendley I don't know what the joke's about but he certainly got the right person to play the part. Quirk, you deserve an Oscar. You almost had me thinking you believed what you were telling me." His laughter filled the room.

"Did you call someone?" one of the salesmen asked, sticking his head around the door jamb. Mrs. Quirk made her way past him and through the door.

"No, no," McLean said behind her. "Quirk was just telling me a joke." Already in the hall, Mrs. Quirk heard him laugh again. She didn't see him rock back and lose his balance. She did hear the sickening thump as the base of his skull

hit the corner of the filing cabinet, and the salesman's startled yell.

She clutched her purse a little tighter as she went on out of the building without looking back.

Fendley's eyes were overbright. He seemed to be suppressing a smile as Mrs. Quirk faced him in his office. "Twelve, Fendley. Twelve dead. McLean just cracked his skull open after I tried to tell him about your sick joke." Fendley giggled in delight and beat a tattoo with his heels on the floor. Mrs. Quirk watched his reactions with horror.

"Fendley! In that restaurant fire people died who weren't even on your list! What's wrong with you?" She itched to slap him.

"Wrong?" He moved to a closet and opened the door. Mrs. Quirk saw that he too had reconstructed the list. His was in large letters on poster paper. He took a red marker and drew a line through McLean's name, then eyed his handiwork with satisfaction. "Nothing at all wrong, Quirk. Oh, but I wish I'd known . . . then I'd really have used those letters effectively . . ." He smiled delightedly as his little brown eyes glazed over with power-lust and madness. Then they focused again—on her. "Very effec-

tively, but no matter."

Mrs. Quirk looked at the last name: Becky Ward. "What about Becky? The girl has a husband and two kids."

He lifted his shoulders, palms up. "What?"

"You *could* wish her well! May God damn you, you're responsible for this."

His smile grew cruel, his small eyes narrowing beneath his heavy black brows. "Becky wasn't very nice to me when she worked here."

"Meaning that she wouldn't let you catch her when you chased her around your desk. Fendley, you're a two-hundred pound waste of human flesh."

He glowered malevolently at her as she stood up. Mrs. Quirk felt faint. She wasn't used to her circulation thundering in her ears. Fendley was probably wishing *her* dead, she thought without emotion.

She felt a little less dizzy as the light flashing on his phone distracted him. "Tell the congressman I'll call him back in a few minutes," he told the congressman's secretary tersely after he answered it.

"Go ahead and tell Haroldson what progress you've made in acquiring the rights-of-way." It was really a shot in the dark, but she was pleased to see that it had struck home.

"How did you know?" he de-

manded, putting down the phone.

Mrs. Quirk shrugged. "My friend Gary Efferson is an avid reader of the financial news—surprisingly. He noticed that the congressman's wife had acquired controlling interest in Acme Paper. Haroldson's wife also directs the development company he ran before he was elected. It's not hard to figure out that our properties—the Andersons', the Effersons', and my own—form a stopper in the Acme Paper bottleneck, cutting off direct access to the interstate. With a major city only forty-five minutes away, development of the Acme land should be worth millions.

"The congressman probably paid you a generous amount with which to purchase the land and then sell it directly to Acme. But you made a game out of getting the properties for little or nothing."

"Almost right," Fendley smiled. "Actually my good friend Haroldson offered me a piece of the action. George, poor fool, had already wandered into the Wednesday night card game and started losing money before my deal with Haroldson. Too bad he died before I got that deed.

"But you know the best part, Quirk? There's not a thing you or anyone can do." He giggled. "Now run along to Becky Ward. Tell her to send out thirteen letters! Tell her to send one to *me*! And I'll get your sister to stop those commitment proceedings I had her start against you." His giggle grew into a side-holding, gurgling laugh.

Adelia Quirk's blue eyes brightened with a knowing light. "Sorry, Fendley," she told him soberly, although he couldn't hear her above the sound of his own laughter, "but Becky wouldn't know what I was talking about." She closed the door on his hysteria.

In the outer office, the new secretary moved hurriedly out of the way as Mrs. Quirk opened the desk drawer. "Sorry, dear, just something I forgot to mail," she told the blonde as she slipped the thirteenth letter from beneath the drawer tray and into her purse.

Remembering a certain Buick title, she decided to wait until she got home to burn the letter. Although that might not be necessary—hadn't that been a shriek coming from Fendley's office? Then again, she had never been able to hear much from in there. . . .

FICTION:

The Still Small Voice

by Jas. R. Peprin



Illustration by Jim Odbert

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This is what we did.

At first, from down under the music, we didn't notice that somebody was working the downstairs security buzzer like a fire alarm. It's a tall old building. Fenton lives there. We were lazing around his top floor apartment, the two of us, looking out at the storm that was lashing the snow along the roofs by the shovelful. There was a fifth of Chivas on the table, and an old Guess Who record on the stereo was cranked up loud enough to shiver the dust off the lamps.

Fenton is a second-story man who considers himself respectable because he only steals from the rich; I take bets on the races, and try not to think about things like that.

The storm had caught our attention, and we sat with the rock and roll pounding us, drinking and staring out the window in awe. We welcomed the break; we were just coming down from a heavy discussion on criminal ethics, with Fenton driving his fist into his palm, arguing that even a criminal—*especially* a criminal, he said—had to follow a moral standard below which he would not sink.

"A forger can draw the line at robbery, and a thief at armed robbery—I never carry a gun. Even an armed robber can draw

the line at murder, and a murderer at rape, and so on. You've got to listen to that still, small voice within. It's that or lose your self-respect."

Now we sat without speaking, in a storm of music, looking out on a storm of snow and making bets by means of signs on when the next hump of snow would fall off the roof. Fenton's building makes a ninety degree jog next to his window, where the stairwell goes down, and you can see out onto the steep copper-green roof of it, and the eaves. The snow spiraled down out of the night like handfuls of Iceland, mounding up on the lip of the eaves and slipping off from time to time in a drift that whumped past the window on a ten story drop to the street.

I was four dollars up (betting's my business, after all) when Fenton set down his glass. He was dark, sad-eyed, and quick, like a black dog, and until you got to know him you were afraid he might bite you.

He leaned across the couch, gusting up his lungs to shout Burton Cummings, and his lips moved. I shrugged. He leaned even closer and cupped his hands, screaming.

"I SAID, DID YOU HEAR THE DOORBELL RING?"

I hadn't, but to make him happy I padded over to the tin speaker set in the wall by the

door. It was buzzing like a fly under a plate.

I pressed the talk button and yelled, "Yes!"

The voice in the wall sputtered wildly. I couldn't make it out above the music, so I made a sign to Fenton that I was going to have a look and legged it down the hall. The elevator whirled me down the shaft. I got out at the main floor and looked through the door.

It was Pursad. He ran drugs. I knew him right off from a description Fenton had given me. He and Fenton went back a ways. Pursad was front page news just now, having just received a ten year term for trafficking. But, incredibly, here he stood outside the glass in a black hat and coat, like a big lost child, the wind whirling the snow around his knees. He was eating an ice cream cone.

When I unlocked the door he paced into the hall, pink-cheeked and breathing. There was ice cream on his lip. Vannilla.

"My *God*, what a night!" He popped the last of the cone into his mouth, munched twice, and swallowed it. "You're Henday, aren't you? I've got to see Fenton. Is he there?"

Fenton frowned up to see what had come into the room. The music surged even more

fiercely now; I was sure he must have turned it up while I was out. Pursad advanced into the middle of the floor and stood bowing into the speakers like a man in a gale. It was as if the storm outside had found a way in at him through the electric wires; you expected his hair to blow back. Fenton scowled on like a dog facing a cat. Pursad smiled thinly and made a mild gesture as though to brush the music away. I went to the stereo and switched it off.

Pursad smiled round at us.

"Well, that's a relief, isn't it? Like shutting off an air raid. I don't see how you fellows stand it. Are you masochists? I can show you a place on Bloor Street you'd like. And they serve sandwiches afterwards."

Fenton was as grim as a carving. "What do you want?"

Pursad threw me a wink, as if we had ridden in together on the bus, fellow conspirators, to blow up the town.

"That's a nice welcome, isn't it? I mean, why bother having enemies? Glad to see you, Pursad, old buddy. Come in out of the storm. Take a hot rum. Take a hot bath. Take a twenty dollar bill." He smiled like a ferret in a cage. "Oh no, nothing hurts *my* feelings, does it?"

He stamped the snow off his shoes and hung his coat over the television.

"Don't get comfy," Fenton said.

"See how he gets?" Pursad said to me. He trotted to the window and stood sideways, ogling down at the street. Snow melting on the cuffs of his grey trousers had left dark water marks up his calves like high boots. "You wouldn't turn me out, would you? Comrades-in-arms and all that. What if I got blown under a truck? What if I froze to a telephone booth? It would be on your head, Fenton, you'd have to live with that."

"I could stand it," Fenton growled.

"That's fine," said Pursad, "you say that now." He took a glass out of his pocket, rubbed it on his sleeve, and helped himself to some Chivas. "There's a chill in here, don't you feel it?"

"You can't stay here, Pursad," said Fenton, "never mind the climate. And where did you get that glass?"

Pursad lifted his head and tossed back his drink with a practiced wrist. He whistled.

"Good," he said, "but *not* Glenlivet. Do you mean this glass? I had a drink today at a tavern and forgot about it. I guess I could mail it to them. And what makes you think I want to stay here, anyway? I don't, you know."

He went to the window to look down again, and shud-

dered. "Brrr! I don't like heights."

"Then what do you keep looking down for?" I asked.

He came mincing back at me, smirking.

"Hah, then you *are* still talking to me. I thought I might have offended you."

"You're offending *me*," Fenton put in.

"*Everything* offends *him*," Pursad grinned. "He's like a Protestant monk. He's like a dog with a limp. He's like a thin girl with a rash. Why do I look out the window? Because it's a natural thing to do, I suppose—like crossing your legs. People cross their legs, don't they?"

"Not always," I said. "Not when they're standing up."

A hillock of snow broke loose from the eaves and went whumping by. Pursad leaped and turned as if he'd been spun by a rope.

"What was that?"

"Our landlady," Fenton said, "she's just fallen off the roof." He turned to me. "You know why he keeps looking, don't you? Because the police had a nice stay arranged for him at the prison, and he gave them the slip. He wants to pull a no-show, and they've got other ideas."

"I guessed that," I answered. "But I don't see the good of him looking. What does he expect to

see? We're ten stories up. Can he tell people by the tops of their heads?"

"Sure. If they're wearing blue caps, I guess he can."

"I'd know a policeman through a lavatory seat," said Pursad. "And I don't believe you about your landlady. She wouldn't be out on the roof in a storm like this, would she?"

"She was sweeping the snow off the chimney," Fenton snapped. "She was coming after you next, with bug spray. She keeps a clean house, or hadn't you noticed?" He grabbed up Pursad's coat from the television and held it out. "Now it's time you were leaving. Dress warm, it's cold out!"

Pursad set his glass down, puckered his lips, and folded his arms. Fenton edged up on him.

"Do you want me to throw you out, then?"

"You're too honorable for that. As I said, comrades-in-arms. The police are down there. You can see their car. You can't turn me over to them. It wouldn't be right." Then he added with a sly squint, "If you do throw me out, I'll sit down and wait for them in the hall outside your door. I'll tell them everything I know about you." He eyed Fenton meaningfully. "All those break and enters. Oh, they'd love to hear what *I've* got to say."

I went to the window and looked down. There was indeed a police car stopped in the street before the building. A snowplow stood before it, all steaming exhaust and flashing lights. I beckoned to Fenton, who looked for himself, then rounded on Pursad again, hissing:

"You had to bring them to my place, didn't you?"

"They don't know you live here," I reminded him.

"That's right," said Pursad. "And they won't know which suite—unless I tell them."

Fenton surged up with his fists.

"Are you threatening me, you scum?"

"Oh, that's nice, isn't it. That's fine talk between friends. Did you kiss your mother with that mouth, too?" Pursad turned to me, appealing. "He's putting on airs now, you see. Trying to make out he's somebody else. Somebody grand. And he's no better than I am."

"I'm a damn sight better than you are," Fenton snarled. "I'm a thief, and you're a pusher. We're worlds apart, Pursad. A choirboy and a cannibal. You really make me sick, you do. Trying to pretend that all criminals are brothers. What crap. The worst I've ever done is lift a diamond ring from a millionaire—like stealing a pinch of sand from a beach. But you!

You're an animal, Pursad—a killer! You prey on the weak. How many lives have you ruined, how many suicides have you caused? How many kids have you dragged down into the sewer before they were old enough to smell you coming? Brothers! Crap!"

Pursad thought a minute.

"I don't eat babies," he argued reasonably.

"That's something, Fenton," I said.

"And anyway, I'm not my brother's keeper. They come to me, don't they? I only provide a service. You can't blame me for the harshness of the world."

"That's right, Fenton," I said.

"If you throw me out," Pursad whined, "you'll be throwing me into the arms of the law. I wouldn't complain, except that they don't give a man a fair trial. All that rubbish about 'a jury of his peers.' That's good, isn't it? A jury of clerks and shopkeepers and ladies in hats is what they mean. *Those* aren't my peers. When, at a drug trial, did you ever see twelve traffickers in the jury box, eh? Can't answer, can you? Because you never have seen it, that's why." His head bobbed with wisdom. "Just wait until *you're* in the dock and eyeing your own jury—there won't be one sneak thief among them."

"Sneak thief!" Fenton re-

plied, bristling, "don't call *me* a sneak thief!"

"Well, why not? You sneak, don't you? And you thief. What are you then?"

Fenton glanced around for help. He found an answer in the air and threw out his chest. "I'm a cat burglar," he announced proudly.

Pursad threw him a sour look. "I don't see that's so much better." He had picked the sugar bowl up from the sideboard and was eating up the sugar with the little nips of his fingers.

"It's better than being a pusher!" Fenton strode past me, choked with rage. In his mind he was at Pursad's throat with his teeth bared. He took my elbow. "Come on, Henday. Let's have a conference—privately."

"Sure. Talk behind my back, then," Pursad said in a wounded tone. He turned away with his glass to watch the snow.

Fenton pulled me into the kitchen.

"That creep has *got-to-go!*" He punctuated his words by jabbing his finger into my chest. "What in hell am I going to do with him?"

"Let's look at the options," I said. I began to strike them off on one hand. "A: you turn him over to the police."

"No. He's right. I couldn't do that. Much as I hate him."

"B: you throw him out of the

suite and let him take his chances."

"That's as bad as the other. Besides, he'd definitely put the cops onto me."

"C: you let him stay here until the heat cools down."

Fenton shivered at the thought. "I'd rather have maggots in my bed."

"D: . . ."

"Well, what about D?"

"I don't know. Can't you think of something?"

"I'm trying." He pressed his knuckles against his brow. "I know what I'd like to do with him. I'd like to put him down the chute at the end of the hall."

"No good," I said. "He'd never fit. Probably all those sweets."

Fenton picked up the carving knife and eyed it wickedly. "I could deal with that. I might even enjoy it!"

I winced. "Put that down, for God's sake. Have you forgotten what you said about 'the still, small voice'?"

We stared at the cupboards for a good long time, Fenton steaming away like hot coals in a snowbank, and finally I said, "It looks to me like you've got no choice. You'll have to help him get away from the police." I shook my head, studying the knife. "You're a prisoner of your own ethics, Fenton. A man of ideals. It's too bad you have such high principles."

"Yes," he said, "too bad. But there may be a way." A very nasty little gleam had suddenly sprung into his eye.

Pursad was waiting for us. He was standing before the window, watching the snow fall out of the sky and eating pinches of sugar out of the sugar bowl. "You talked about me," he said, "my ear itched."

Fenton said, folding his arms, "I'm going to help you, Pursad, but only because Henday shamed me into it. I'll give you some money, and I'll show you a way out of here that I use myself, one that fools the cops every time."

"How much will you give me?" Pursad kept staring out the window as if he didn't care one way or the other, sucking the sugar from his fingers with loud kissing noises. "And what way out are you going to suggest? Is it a tunnel? A rolled up carpet?—I saw a man in a movie smuggled out like that once. I hope you aren't planning to send me into the sewers like a Jean Valjean."

"Nothing that romantic," Fenton said. "And I can only spare you a hundred dollars."

"Cash?" said Pursad, watching the snow.

"Yes, cash. But if it was a check, you wouldn't have to worry." He handed Pursad five

twenties. "Even a forged check from me would be better than a real check from a lot of others."

"I'll take your word for that, I won't put it to the test," Pursad replied, pocketing the money. He began pulling on his coat, leaning into the sleeves. "Thanks for your decency, Henry. I think Fenton might have thrown me out of the window if it hadn't been for you. I'll remember it, too. When I'm clear of all this I won't forget what I owe you. I may even offer you some very good crack. No charge."

I shook my head. "No thanks."

Fenton was at the door. "Are you coming or not?"

Pursad blinked. "You don't have your overcoat on."

"I said I was going to *show* you a way out, not lead you past the police like a bloody nanny."

Pursad sighed through his nose. He said to me, "I really hate to trust him, you know. But I don't suppose I have much choice under the circumstances."

"I don't suppose you do," Fenton said.

They went out.

I poured myself a fresh Chivas, dropped an ice cube into it, turned up the heat, and sat down to look out at the storm.

Fenton wasn't gone long. A

few minutes at the most. He came in, closed the door, and dusted off his hands like a man who has finished with a particularly onerous chore.

"I'm glad *he's* gone," he said. "It's worth a hundred dollars to be rid of him. I'd have paid a thousand."

"And I'm glad you didn't put the carving knife into him," I replied. "It would have meant the end of our friendship. I don't think I could socialize with a knife-murderer. As you said yourself, not all criminals are brothers. There is still a class system to consider." I poured him another scotch. "Do you want me to put Burton Cummings back on the stereo?" I pointed out the window. "And see that lump of snow there. . . . No, the one with the ridge—I'll bet you the whole four dollars, double or nothing, it falls off in . . ." I looked at my watch ". . . in not less than six minutes, not more than eight."

"You lose," said Fenton blandly.

"What?"

I glanced up, staring.

He was right. The snow hump was already gone. And I saw why, too. It hadn't fallen due to natural forces.

It had fallen because Pursad had kicked it.

"God!" I exclaimed, jumping to my feet. "What's he doing out

there?" I remembered Pursad's earlier vertigo. I felt it myself now, just looking at him.

"That," said Fenton calmly, "is my escape route. Just as I promised him. You can jump to the building next door on the other side—with a little nerve. He must have forgotten I'm a cat burglar. But he needn't worry. He said himself it doesn't take any great skill to do my sort of work."

Pursad came crablegging at us along the steep icy slope of the gable roof, dwarfed, gripping with his toes and fingers like a man on the face of Everest. The wind swooped the snow round him and snapped his coattails like black flags. With each movement he made, another mass of crusted snow broke loose and went spiraling down to the street. He was staring at us through the window, wide-eyed with terror, his lips moving soundlessly as Fenton's had done in the blare of the music. "What's he saying?" I whispered, horrified.

"Don't know," said Fenton. "He talks too much anyhow."

"I think he's shouting at us to come and bring him in."

"To hell with that. A deal's a deal. He came to me, didn't

he? He wanted to know my escape route and I showed him. I opened a door, he stepped out, I closed it. I did my part. He's on his own now." He stirred irritably. "Look, are you going to put that record on, or aren't you?"

I backed towards the stereo, my eyes still fixed on the clinging, beetling Pursad, got the record going again by touch, and crept back to the couch, staring.

"Fenton," I said, my throat gone dry with a dizzy fear, "you can't do this. You tricked him. If he falls, it will be murder!"

"Nonsense," said Fenton, "I only provided him a service. I'm not his keeper. He can't blame me for the harshness of the world. My conscience is clear. Forget about him." He took out his wallet. "You're a bookie, aren't you? Get your money out. There's plenty to bet on in the world. What are the chances of a nuclear war? Of Maggie Thatcher winning another term? What odds are you giving on that snowbank falling off the roof? The one that's already starting to slip. That black wool one there at the very edge with its fingernails starting to split..."

HIT & RUN



by William J. Reynolds

Pat said, "The damage doesn't look *too* bad. . . ."

Brian said, "According to the cops' little chart thingy, three hundred and fifty bucks."

"Well . . ."

"And the cops are always off by about two hundred—*under* by two hundred, I mean."

"We're covered, at least. . . ."

"After a hundred dollar deductible we're covered. And forty bucks to replace the license plate that got torn off. Bottom-line it and *I'm* out a hundred and forty bucks because some bastard bashed into the front end of my car during the night and didn't have guts enough to own up to it."

Brian Casaday kicked a front tire in impotent fury. Pat Casaday put a consoling hand on her husband's arm. It was the wrong thing to do—in situations like this, there is no right thing to do—and, if anything, only fueled the anger that already burned deep in Casaday's brain. He pulled away and, instantly regretting even that innocent and understandable rejection of her, tried to cover it by saying, "Come on, let's go into the house. I should've at least let you get your coat off before laying this on you."

"That's okay," said Pat, neither fooled by Brian's words nor offended by his action.

"There's a small consola-

tion." Casaday was trying hard to layer a veneer of coolness over his hot outrage. "All that glass there—" he gestured jerkily toward the pavement in front of his car, an '85 Chevy Celebrity parked against the curb—"is *his*, not mine. I have the feeling he racked up his own car worse."

Pat Casaday frowned. Like her husband, she was thirty-four, dark-haired, of medium build and fine features. Unlike him, she could have passed for twenty-seven or twenty-eight. Casaday's prematurely thinning hair—and the full beard he wore in what he would not deny might have been a subconscious response to the baldness—caused people to routinely guess his age at five to ten years more than it was. Brian Casaday was a freelance illustrator and art director: Pat Casaday was a research chemist, and it was in a professionally analytical way that she said, "This doesn't make sense. That's headlight glass all over everything, not taillight. Did he hit head-on?"

Casaday shook his head, stuck a cigarette in his mouth, and set fire to it. It was his third since Pat got home, and she had no reason to believe there weren't a dozen dead ones in ashtrays all over the house. She said nothing.

"The only way it makes sense," Brian said through a halo of smoke, "is the guy parked here, on the wrong side of the street, and somehow locked front bumpers when he tried to leave. Drunk, probably. Him rocking back and forth trying to get loose is what bashed up the bumper and the grill and ripped away the license and dimpled that fender. *And* knocked out his car's headlights, which is what *I'd* like to do to *him*, the son of a bitch."

She should have gone into the house when he mentioned it a few minutes ago, Pat realized now. He was starting in again. She took a few preliminary steps up the front walk and, in her best looking-on-the-bright-side voice, said, "Well, let's be glad it wasn't a *real* accident, you know, with people getting hurt."

"No, let's hope the creep knocked his teeth out against the steering wheel trying to rock loose," Brian suggested venomously.

"Cars can be fixed," Pat persisted. "People can't. We'll pay the deductible and we'll get the car taken care of and we'll be glad it wasn't worse." She moved resolutely toward the house. Brian lagged behind for several minutes, alternately studying the car and the houses across the street. Then he followed up

the front steps, catching up with her in the living room.

"I bet I can get the bastard," he said, a trifle breathlessly.

"Don't you think you've had enough of those?" Pat said sourly, indicating yet another cigarette that Brian was fishing out of the battered red pack. "The place smells like a burning building."

"I'm only smoking them half-way."

"Then by all means feel free to smoke twice as many. What do you mean you can get him?"

Casaday paced the room almost frantically. He was a thin, wiry man given to great bursts of energy not always fully absorbed by his creative work. "Think about it. This is a residential street, a side street. Who would park here? Someone who lives on the block, or someone who's visiting someone who lives on the block."

"Gee, Brian, that's almost interesting."

"Don't you see? If it's someone who lives around here, we'll know who it is by the bashed-up car. If it's a visitor, maybe he'll come visiting again."

Pat sighed. "You're not thinking straight, boy. If you had plowed into one of your neighbor's cars, and you weren't big enough to take your lumps for it, don't you think you'd keep *your* car out of sight until

you got it repaired? And if you were just passing through, don't you think you'd steer clear of that neighborhood for a while?"

Her husband would not be deterred. "If you were drunk enough to park on the wrong side of the street *and* drive smack into a car sitting right in front of you, you might not even remember it the next day. No." He turned toward the picture window that overlooked the quiet, treelined street. "I think I'll keep my eyes peeled for the next couple of days. I'm especially gonna watch that apartment building." He gestured with his chin toward a squat shake-shingle building on a double lot across the street and down a few doors. It had gone up two years ago following a hot zoning contest—one lost by residents who, like the Casadays, wanted to keep the neighborhood one of single-family dwellings. The building had only twelve units, but even so it seemed to have eaten up all of the available parking space on this street lined with one-car-garage houses; it had sparked comings and goings at all hours of the day and night; and it spoiled the 1930's-style charm of the old neighborhood. Brian Casaday was not alone amongst his neighbors in thinking that everything that was wrong with the block em-

anated from the unassuming building.

"Why don't you just forget about it?" Pat said in a voice that didn't quite manage to sound as reasonable as she had hoped. "Let the insurance company worry about it."

Brian had an opinion on that, but he kept it to himself and the divorce rate stayed constant for one more evening.

At seven o'clock that evening Brian Casaday announced that he was going for a walk. His wife gave him a look that could have melted glass, but said nothing.

Casaday's "walk" covered a territory stretching two blocks out from his house in all directions. The exercise probably did Brian some good, but the only scenery he saw was automobiles. Specifically, the front end of every automobile within the perimeter he had mapped out for himself. Without acknowledging it, Brian realized that Pat was right: a hit-and-run artist, even a drunk one, would be shrewd enough to avoid the scene of the crime as long as his car could be identified. Brian also knew that most people are lazy, and won't walk any farther than they have to—thus the two-block search area.

There was no sign of any car

with shattered headlights. A cracked taillight, but the litter on the street had been the thick clear cover-glass and thin silvered reflective glass of headlights, not the red or white or amber plastic of rear-light assemblies.

The excitement, the expectancy in Brian Casaday was replaced by vexation. He had hoped . . . now hope was bleeding out of him. Having spent some time that morning on the phone to several body shops, Brian knew that most places in town were backed up for the next couple of days. Which meant that his hit-and-runner would be similarly delayed in getting *his* car fixed. Which meant only a day, maybe two, before the s.o.b.'s car could be made indistinguishable, for Brian's purpose, from any other car in town.

He toured the tiny six-car parking space behind the offensive apartment house across the street. Wasted effort.

Casaday repeated his "walk" at eleven P.M., dogged by painful awareness of the fact that the man he sought (funny how he automatically assumed the guilty party was a man) could pretty much come and go at will, since Brian couldn't patrol the entire neighborhood all the time. Only the greatest of luck, unbelievable, impossible luck,

could reward his efforts.

And rescue him from looking like the total buffoon he was beginning to feel very much like.

Consequently he prayed fervently for exactly that kind of nonexistent luck.

And his prayers were answered.

Prudently, Brian Casaday waited for his wife to go to work the following morning before undertaking his next patrol. Pat, as usual, left for the lab at seven; by seven ten Brian was halfway up the street. He repeated exactly the routine he had established the previous night, sauntering through the apartment house's little lot last of all. There sat a blue Honda CRX whose left headlight was only a gaping hole in which hung a few determined shards of curved, silvered glass. The surrounding trim was scraped and wrinkled. The front bumper was similarly damaged.

Casaday could have danced a jig right there, but he didn't. He kept walking. After all, the car's owner could be looking out a window, coming out the front door, right at that very minute, and the last thing Casaday wanted was to tip him off. Through the corner of an eye he noted the Honda's license-plate

number. He could turn that over to the police, at least. At the *very* least.

His plans didn't include the police. Not yet, at any rate. Of course, "plans" was putting it strongly. Brian Casaday didn't have anything approaching a "plan"; he hadn't had so much as a fleeting thought of what would happen next if by some miracle he actually found the bastard who had smacked his car. Now, something in the nature of an eye-for-an-eye response began rattling around in Casaday's slowly balding head. He didn't know what, exactly . . . but something . . .

Casaday scrambled back to his house as fast as possible, his limbs literally trembling with excitement, with a kind of juvenile, giddy joy. Now, at least, he wouldn't look like a total nimrod to Pat. In fact, as he thought about it, he realized he'd look pretty damn good. Heroic, almost. Not a bad bit of detective work, if he did say so himself.

He didn't, though, not at the moment. No time. Time only to race upstairs and collect the binoculars that hadn't seen the light of day in nearly two years, then race downstairs and hop into the Celebrity and find a suitable spot for an inconspicuous stakeout.

The sun was high and the

morning was nearly a memory before anyone came near the car. Brian Casaday, slouched behind the wheel of his car, avoided sleep by alternately fiddling with the binoculars and smoking.

Shortly after eleven, two men came out of the apartment house and headed toward the Honda. Casaday recognized neither of them. They were in their late twenties, he would have guessed. Neither was anything to look at. The taller of the two was a pale, skinny kid in a ratty green T-shirt and jeans, stringy blond hair falling into his eyes. The other was stocky, dark-haired, with a peachfuzz beard under his chin. He wore a black windbreaker, black jeans, and dark glasses, and looked like he was trying hard to look like someone else.

The two men were deep in discussion—Casaday couldn't hear any of it—and paid not the slightest attention to the Chevrolet parked across the street or the man at its steering wheel. They got into the Honda. The dark man drove.

Casaday followed. He had no way of knowing whether the dark-haired man, who he assumed owned the car, lived in the apartment house on his block. If so, great; if not, he wanted to know where he did live, and this seemed the surest

way of finding out. Besides, Casaday found himself curious about the sort of person who would ruin another's property and simply walk away. Such behavior was completely alien to him . . . or almost so: Brian might think about running, if it looked like he could get away with it, but ultimately something inside him—morality, fear, something—would compel him to do the Right Thing. He didn't comprehend any other way, and he couldn't understand anyone who did.

The Honda led Casaday crosstown, to a corner of the city he scarcely knew existed, a corner that politicians and Chamber of Commerce diplomats and civic boosters liked to pretend didn't exist. The North End was no combat zone as found in other, larger cities. But it was not a pleasant neighborhood. It was a tired neighborhood, a neglected and careworn and generally rundown neighborhood, comprising narrow, pockmarked streets and lawns worn to bare earth on which filthy children played. It was decaying cars parked in yards next to sagging houses. It was vacant storefronts and shattered windows and graffiti.

Casaday rolled his window to within an inch of closed and locked his door.

The Honda bumped up

against the curb in front of a gray brick cube of a building. By the look of it, Brian guessed that the building had once, long ago, been a candy store or a corner grocery. It sat on the corner, large display windows looking out onto both streets. One window was boarded with plywood festooned with slogans and obscenities. The doorway was set into the corner of the building, easily accessible from either street. On the second level, double-hung windows placed at regular intervals hinted at an apartment.

The two men, dark and light, left the car and stood on the sidewalk in front of the brick building, continuing their conversation. The dark one seemed to be pressing the blond. The blond was nervous, agitated. Finally, though, he accompanied the other into the building.

Casaday, who had hung back nearly a block and observed the exchange through his binoculars, didn't quite know what to do. Could the dark-haired man live here? Casaday noted the address, commenting to himself that it didn't look like *anyone* occupied the brick building, up or down, but that half the houses in the neighborhood looked deserted, too, and weren't.

He put the car into gear and idled it down the street, making

a lazy horseshoe at the end of the block and coasting up to the curb across the street from, and slightly past, the Honda. Then he killed the engine and slunk down into his seat and adjusted both the rearview and the side-board mirrors to bring the Honda into easy view.

Casaday had no time to get comfortable. Within minutes the blond kid bolted from the building and ran down the block as if all the hounds of hell were on his heels. In fact, the stocky man was in pursuit, but half-heartedly. He half-ran, half-staggered down the sidewalk after the other man. Then he collapsed onto the concrete.

For an instant Casaday contemplated leaving and forgetting he had ever been there. And then, automatically, his middle-class upbringing kicked in and he found himself jumping out of the car and running across the street to the fallen man, ready to do the Right Thing.

It was too late for that. The man was dead. His black wind-breaker was slashed open cross-wise and, beneath it, so was his belly. His clothes were soaked with blood that still flowed freely from the wound. Horrified, Casaday observed the red trail from the front door to the spot where the man lay, the wet redness on his own hands and clothes.

That was the last thing Casaday observed before the world turned over and his brain exploded into a kaleidoscope of colors.

There were two of them, both bigger than Casaday. He had not heard them approach, and even if he had, he would have been unprepared for the suddenness and the ferocity of their attack. They were all fists and knees and feet, pummeling him, knocking him down, beating him. He had no breath to yell, to scream, to cry for help.

From a distance, from some other point in time and space, Brian witnessed them dragging his limp body into the building. He was dropped into a faded and sprung easy chair from which billows of dust erupted. The chair smelled old, old. *This is what death smells like*, said some part of Brian Casaday's mind, dissociated from his body. The two men left the building again and retrieved the dead man. If they even noticed the blood on the sidewalk, the blood they were getting on themselves, they showed no concern about it. In neighborhoods like that, things happen.

The first floor of the gray building consisted of three rooms, which had in their day been display room, storeroom, and minuscule office. The main room was vacant except for

some odds and ends—the ancient chair in which Brian Casaday lay, several crates, a broken bentwood chair, a long, broad counter at which countless kids turned over countless pennies for countless gumballs. The two men dumped the body behind the counter, one of them kicking an uncooperative foot out of sight. The men were similar in build, different in appearance. One was slender, nicely dressed, carefully groomed, with an intense, introspective look to him. The other, equally slender, was disheveled, with untrimmed hair and wrinkled clothes and an impassive, almost empty face. The former had dark Mediterranean looks; the latter might have been of Asian or American Indian extraction.

"What do we do about this guy, Ben?" the unkempt man grunted.

The other man, Ben, rubbed a hand over his mouth and chin ruminatively. "Let's get him upstairs at least. Everyone who walks past that window doesn't have to see him there."

The stairway was long and narrow, and Brian was conscious enough to be aware of the toes of his shoes clunking on every step as the two men carried him up. There was a door at the top of the stairs. The one called Ben kicked it open. He

and his companion dragged Brian over the threshold and dropped him onto bare wooden floor in the center of a square room.

Scarred floor—peeling wallpaper—the smell of death. They came to Brian in that order as he fell. The room, which had been a living room for several proprietors of the store that had once been downstairs, was virtually unfurnished. A tattered sofa was shoved against one wall. A boom box sat on a dimstore coffee table in front of it. A couple of folding chairs. A cheap chrome and plastic dining table.

Behind the table a young woman, slender, dark-haired, very serious looking.

On the table, two dozen flat packages, plastic and foil wrapped. A lot of money. And guns.

Brian closed his eyes, which had hardly been open at all.

"What's going on?" the girl wanted to know. Her voice was flat, almost conversational. That was funny, Brian thought. He would have laughed, but he was too tired. Maybe later.

"I don't know," Ben said. There was an edge to his voice. "We heard Donny downstairs with that other guy. We went to see what the commotion was. Nobody was down there. Donny was out on the street, dead. The

other guy was long gone. *This* guy was leaning over Donny."

"Did he do it?"

"Donny was cut; this guy's got no blade."

"What'd you do with Donny?"

"Me and Joe brought him inside. This guy, too," Ben added needlessly. "We've gotta figure out what to do with him."

"Do?" the woman said. "Kill him and let's lose this place. We're made."

"He doesn't look like a cop. . . ." *The other man*, Brian thought. Mike.

"What does a cop look like, stupid? Undercover cops aren't *supposed* to look like cops, that's why they put them undercover. Maybe this guy's a cop, maybe the other guy's a cop, maybe they're both cops. Anyway, we tear down here and set up somewhere else."

"Take it easy, Elaine," Ben said. "We gotta think this out. . . ."

"Good idea. Let's take it easy and wait for the cops to show up. Should I finish counting the money while we wait?"

Brian Casaday cracked open one eye and looked up at her. No hatred, no venom, nothing showed in her face. It was smooth, impassive. He shuddered.

"If he's a cop, killing him's only gonna bring every cop in the state down on us."

"If the other guy's a cop, every cop in the state's on the way here now."

"Since when does a cop use a blade?" said the one they called Mike. "That guy was no cop. He was a coke-head who freaked. Who knows how come? He's not gonna come back, not after icing Donny."

"Okay." This from the woman, Elaine. "So that leaves this guy." She turned her attention to Ben, who seemed to Brian to either be the man in charge or the man who, for whatever reason, had to be in at least reluctant compliance with whatever was decided. "We've got two choices: Clear out and leave him here alive, or clear out and leave him here dead. Either way, this place has had it. It's too risky now."

Ben studied Casaday for a long time. Through slitted eyelids, Casaday studied him, aware, in a vague and curiously detached way, that this was the man who would decide whether he lived or died.

Finally Ben turned to Mike. "Let's do him in the bathroom. Quietly."

Quietly.

Something about the word "quietly" struck Casaday. Quietly? He didn't want to go quietly! He wanted to go noisily! Raucously! Obnoxiously! Most of all he didn't want to go, pe-

riod, not now, not yet.

Somehow—it was as if someone pushed him—somehow he rolled away from the two men and toward the woman, or rather toward the table she was still sitting behind. He came up on his hands and knees and, heaving with his back, upset the table. The foil-wrapped parcels dropped heavily to the floor. One broke open and a white powder spilled onto the colorless floorboards. Money scattered across the room. The woman jumped up, away from the table, upending her chair and emitting a high-pitched, startled cry.

One of the men yelled an obscenity.

Brian propelled himself across the room, stumbling toward a dark door in the opposite wall, falling, breathing fire into his chest, laughing or crying or something.

He made it through the door.

He slammed the door shut and twisted the built-in key, pleased at the heavy sound of the deadbolt chunking into place.

The building was old and sturdily built and the door was heavy and solid, but it wouldn't hold forever. Frantically, Casaday looked around. The room was a bedroom, or had been. It was in no better shape than the living room, and scarcely better

furnished. A wide bed on an iron bedstead, a chest of drawers, a folding chair.

His body screaming in outrage, Brian pushed, dragged, shoved the bed across the bare floor and against the door. There was a span of five feet between the edge of the bed and the wall across from the door. Casaday tipped over the chest of drawers and slid it into the gap. The span narrowed to three inches.

The fitful pounding on the door had stopped. Now it was replaced by the heavy, regular thud of two shoulders heaving against it. Casaday wondered how strong the door frame was. Not strong enough, he figured.

The room had two windows, both of which he checked. One offered a straight drop down two stories to the sidewalk in front of the building. The other offered a straight drop down two stories to a graveled alley on the east side of the place. A drainpipe was within easy reach, but it looked as if it would barely support a squirrel's weight, much less a man's.

Brian fought the impulse to panic and limped toward a doorway in a corner of the room. The bathroom. Which was to be his execution chamber.

It was an unpleasant little green-tiled room—tub, stool, towel rack, medicine cabinet, sink.

The hammering at the door quit.

Brian moved into the bathroom doorway, listening.

The bedroom door lock and a goodly portion of the surrounding door and wall exploded in a hellish shotgun blast. The door bounced and bumped open two or three inches. Enough for the barrel of the gun to poke through and aim itself at Brian.

Who barely jumped back into the bathroom before a second blast disintegrated the wall he had stood in front of seconds before.

There were half a dozen dirty towels in the bathroom. Brian grabbed four, wetted them under the bathtub faucet, and, moving as quickly as his battered body would allow, took them into the other room and flung them, dripping, onto the bed.

The two men shoving against the door had moved both the bed and the chest of drawers, which now was firmly wedged against the far wall. The door was open six inches and would open no farther. As if realizing this, the people outside let go two more shotgun blasts, tearing fist-size holes in the wood. If the door would not open, then the door had to go.

Casaday retreated into the bathroom again, scooped up another towel, and ignited it with

his disposable lighter. The towel burned slowly at first, then picked up nicely. Well aware that his enemies now had a wider opening to aim through, Casaday hustled into the bedroom, dropped the burning fabric onto the mattress, and skipped back into the bathroom.

More gunshots violated the door. These did not have the same violent effectiveness as the previous ones. Casaday imagined—hoped—that his tormenters were out of shot, reduced to using handguns. That would give him a little more time, a very little more time.

In the medicine chest were a can of underarm spray, a bottle of aftershave, a can of shaving cream. Casaday took the bottle, stepped into the bedroom, and flung it against the door with every ounce of strength he could command. The bottle shattered, and the alcohol in the shaving lotion instantly ignited into blue flames that fled up the door and licked at the tin ceiling. Brian didn't stand around to watch this happen, however, or to try to decipher the confused voices from the other room. He was back in the bathroom, wrapping the two aerosol cans in his last towel and knotting it tightly.

When he stepped into the bedroom again, he was pleased

to see that it was filling with thick brown smoke from the damp towels and the ticking in the ancient mattress. The door was on fire, and the brittle wall-paper was being eaten away by flames so blue they were almost invisible. He threw his bundle onto the bed and danced quickly across the room to the window that overlooked the alley.

"Holy smoke, he set fire to the place!" someone, one of the men, yelled. The reply, if reply was what it was, was unintelligible.

The window was already open. Casaday kicked out the cheap screen covering it and hoisted himself up into the opening.

The ground was a long way down.

He twisted around and walked down the side of the building as far as he could until his feet slipped and his body was stretched out against the façade, his weight supported only by his fingers on the windowsill. Adrenaline had masked the pain in his abused body; now the pain returned in force, coursing, screaming, down his arms and into his back.

He was as near the ground as he was going to get without letting go.

He let go.

And the aerosol cans on the burning bed exploded, sending glass soaring overhead.

The landing was inelegant but nonfatal. He scraped the side of his face against the wall on his way down and twisted a knee upon landing, but he was out and he was alive.

For the time being. Now that they knew the place was on fire, now that his impromptu bomb had exploded, his captors would be evacuating, too. His efforts would be for nothing if they now caught and killed him in the street.

Brian circled the south end of the building, the side opposite the door, and, pausing, peeked around the west side in time to see the three tumble out onto the street. Both of the men were armed. The woman carried an army duffel heavy enough to require both hands.

"He went down the alley," Mike yelled.

"Screw him," Ben replied, his calm, deliberative demeanor completely lost. "We gotta get out of here."

Mike had by now gone down the front sidewalk, heading for the alley, and his reply was lost to Casaday. Whatever it was, it was enough to convince Ben, after a momentary hesitation, to follow.

That moment—the two men on the other side of the building, the woman's attention on them—was Brian's chance. He dashed across the street and

around the front of his Chevy, putting it between him and the building.

The noise and the smoke had drawn a few residents out onto their porches and stoops. Casaday didn't care about them. All he cared about was getting the hell out of there. Now. He reached into his pocket for his car keys. And realized with sick horror that he didn't have them. They had been in his hand when he went to try to help the knifed man, Donny. He must have dropped them in the street when he was attacked.

Casaday resisted the urge to curl up into a ball on the sidewalk next to his useless car. He was alone and on foot in a dangerous, unfamiliar neighborhood while desperate men with guns hunted for him. Despair hammered at the door he had closed against it in his mind. Like the physical door in the bedroom he had just escaped, the mental door could not hold forever.

Casaday forced himself to straighten slightly and peer through the side windows of the car. No sign of the men. Maybe they thought Casaday had fled straight down the alley that bisected the block. In which case Casaday's best bet was to head in the opposite direction, north and west . . .

But what was the woman

doing? She had stayed on the sidewalk near the corner, the duffel dangling heavily from her hands, her slender white arms stretched with the weight. Now she cocked her head to one side. What did she—ah, Brian heard it now, too: the distant keening of a siren. Someone must have called the police—or, more likely, the fire department: Brian only now became aware of the thick beige smoke roiling upward from the far side of the brick building.

His first feeling was of relief—the familiar, reassuring figures of authority come to rescue him like the cavalry in an old Western. That feeling was fast replaced by one of panic, however, and the realization that there would be a lot of explaining to do, beginning with how he had come to be in that place and ending with how his clothes came to be soiled with the murdered man's blood.

He didn't want to face the police.

Neither did the woman. Having wrestled with indecision far more briefly than Casaday had, she already had lugged her burden over to the blue Honda and was shoving it into the tiny back seat. She's leaving the men to fend for themselves, Casaday thought with a kind of dull surprise, quickly replaced by surprise at having been sur-

prised. Of *course* she would abandon them when things got tough. That's the sort of people they were.

The siren was growing louder—in fact, it was beginning to sound like two or more sirens—and the Honda was pulling away from the curb and Brian Casaday made a decision.

When the car reached the driving lane, Casaday was there to meet it. It had gained no speed yet, and Brian easily caught up to it, yanked open the passenger door, and jumped in.

"Are you crazy!" the woman yelled. "Get out!" She pushed at him with her right hand, slapped and pounded him, and Brian fought back with a viciousness that matched her own, a fervor that would have disgusted him if he had taken the time to think about it.

The Honda rolled through a stop sign at the end of the block.

"Watch the road," Brian yelled. The woman still clawed at him, drawing blood, steering—badly—with one hand. Brian wanted to tell her that he was just trying to get away, that she could let him out in a few blocks and he would go home and forget the whole thing and make no trouble for anybody. But there was no talking. There was only the futile effort of trying to protect himself from

the woman's fury—more to the point, her nails, which had already ripped bloody runners in his arm and neck.

"Will you look where you're go—"

The Honda sideswiped an old and enormous Cadillac parked along the curb. The big car looked as if it was used to that kind of treatment, but the little car wasn't. It rocked, and the woman grabbed the wheel with both hands and oversteered to the left. The Honda, now traveling at slightly more than thirty miles an hour, cut across the wrong lane and plowed head-on into a Ford pickup.

Curiosity, in that neighborhood, was not a trait held in esteem. In general, it paid to mind your own business and let others mind theirs. There were exceptions, however. When the police arrived, and the fire trucks, and the paramedics, the block that had earlier seemed deserted filled with people who came from God knew where, lining the sidewalks, watching, speculating—socializing.

The "fire" was mostly smoke, and the onlookers were disappointed. The audience was rewarded by the arrest of the two armed men, however, and as a bonus one of them had been shot. There was some disagree-

ment as to whether he had been killed or barely wounded at all.

A couple of blocks down the road paramedics worked at the scene of a crash that everyone knew was connected with the business in the brick building. The report on the wreck was garbled, too, but the consensus was that the driver had been killed.

Eventually the excitement waned, and the last of the gaudy cars with colored lights disappeared from the block. The people, most of them, drifted back to wherever they had been and whatever they were doing.

Some kids played on the sidewalk near the brick building, weaving their own stories about the bloodstains there that had turned to rust, using discarded bottles and cans and other flotsam as their toys. From a knot of half a dozen people still clustered across the street, a man drifted free and crossed the asphalt.

"Hey, kid, I'll give you five bucks for those keys."

"Ten."

"Sold."

Brian Casaday considered them cheap at any price.

Only when he had returned home did the realization of what had almost happened to him—hell, what *had* happened to him—really hit. He was sick, wrenchingly sick. Then he showered and dressed in clean clothes and smoked several cigarettes and felt better, almost human.

He had just finished stuffing his ruined clothes into a plastic garbage bag and taking them out to the trash when the phone rang. The voice on the other end was deep, gravelly, guttural:

"This is Officer Van Bockern with the police department. Thought you might like to know that officers apprehended your hit-and-run this afternoon. Kid out joy-riding in his old man's car. He put off telling his dad as long as he could, but . . . well, anyway, I've got the name and number if you've got something to write on."

Mechanically, Brian obeyed.

"The old man says he'll make full restitution, so you may want to give him a call."

"Oh," said Casaday after a long pause. "Thanks. But I think maybe I'll just let my insurance company handle it."

The Oracle of the Flag



by Isak
Romun

While not exactly elegant, the White House was several notches up from seedy. It was pleasant, marginally unhygienic, the sort of place you could bring your family to—though, unaccountably, families seldom showed up in the place. The White House was “slow,” and by that I mean that propelled into the

tavern by a hectic and heedless world, you entered one in which movement and thought were dominated by an agreeable lassitude. The part-owner and sometime bartender, Mr. Piacevole (and we always addressed him that way), smiled as you came in, his lips forming and re-forming like the easy flow of a summer tide. The

White House was a good place, a place for serious drinkers and philosophers.

It was also a good place to meet people. No one bothered you. You could sit at a table for hours with someone and if the ghost of your father suddenly materialized, he might wave languidly at you, but he would leave you alone.

I was with Major Ramy that night. He sat in his rumpled uniform massaging the glass in front of him, neglecting the drink in it as he gnawed at the bones of a bad memory.

"You know what it was like today," he was saying. "All day long it threatened rain and what we got mostly was fog standing off the ground so you couldn't see the top of the headquarters building or the flagpole in front of it."

I interrupted. "Am I getting a story out of this, major?"

He looked up at me reproachfully, then down at his glass. It was a fawning movement, a drill in deference, a drill perfected by army officers whose military occupational specialties—commissary officer, officers' club custodian, public affairs officer—brought them into the line of fire from unlikely peacetime enemies: generals and high-placed colonels—and, of course, their spouses.

Major Ramy was the public affairs officer at nearby Fort

Custis and I got to know him pretty well through a series of feature articles I did about the army post for my paper, the Paulsburg *Advance-Indicator*. Now he was drawing on that thin relationship to get me to do something for him.

Ramy looked up again from his drink and trained on me two of the saddest eyes I had ever seen. Only my sister, Maureen, could look at me that way just before getting her way.

"I hope you don't make a story out of this," he said. "If you do, my army career will end abruptly. What it really amounts to is that I want to talk it out with you. See if you can come up with some explanation. Though, God knows, there really is no explanation."

"Okay," I said, "no story. It's all off the record. I'm just a sympathetic ear who'll try to help you explain whatever it is you want explained."

"Even if you can't explain it, if you could just find the flag for me—"

"The flag?"

"The flag, Mr. Monahan. The colors. Old Glory. Sacred words in the military lexicon."

If Ramy had been treading the boards, there wouldn't have been a dry eye in the house. As it was, I looked away as he swabbed the mist from his.

When I looked back, I said gently, "Whoa now," and held

up a hand. "At the risk of nursing a cliché, why don't you start at the beginning?"

The beginning (Ramy said), okay, the beginning. The very beginning.

I'm weekend officer of the day. At Fort Custis, that's the way the Old Man wants it. They run a separate weekend OD roster. You come on Friday night at retreat, you go off Monday morning on reveille. It's a pain hanging around the post for parts of four days, but it pays. Chances of getting it twice in a tour are remote. If you manage to stay at Custis past three years, you might, otherwise you do it the one time and that's it.

Anyway, the OD is king. He's the representative of the commanding general, the Old Man. Everybody reports to the OD. He goes where he wants and pokes his nose in anywhere he likes.

You might have noticed that today is Sunday, 11 November, the real Veterans Day, or Armistice Day as it used to be called. When a holiday falls on a Sunday you celebrate it on Monday. However, the Old Man directed that we fly the garrison flag, the big twenty-by-thirty-eight-foot job, on both days to celebrate both the real and the official days. The post

is dead today, but tomorrow we'll have a little celebration.

The garrison flag is massive and takes a detail of eight to ten soldiers under the sergeant of the guard to put it up and take it down and fold it properly. The other flags, the post flag and the storm flag, are smaller, the storm flag the smallest of the three. The post and storm can be served properly by as few as two soldiers.

So, Sunday, 11 November, comes in bright and sunny and the special garrison flag detail hoists the colors up the flagpole and there they stay till about 1400—ah, two o'clock this afternoon. Then the fog unexpectedly rolls in and we get word rain is on the way. Out comes the special detail to take down and fold the garrison flag while a two-man detail stands by to put up the storm flag for the rest of the time till retreat. I watched the garrison flag get folded and the storm flag go up the pole and disappear into the fog, then I took off for my rounds of the post.

I enjoy the reveille and retreat ceremonies and when I'm OD I always try to make them.

But today, I'm at the other side of Custis when the retreat gun goes off. After the anthem stops playing over the post PA's, I get in my car and head in the direction of headquarters, figuring I'll catch the storm flag

in its last stage of being taken down. It isn't easy getting there. The fog isn't too thick near the ground and the real rain hasn't arrived. There's only a drizzle, but the roads are slick and there is enough low-lying fog around—nothing compared to the soup above—to make you drive carefully.

When I get to headquarters, the flag is down and the two-man detail, a couple of helmeted PFC's, is folding it.

Sergeant Fennesi, the sergeant of the guard, is on the headquarters steps and I join him. I see Fennesi sort of signal to the PFC's so they know I'm around and don't do anything dumb like letting the flag touch the ground or fold it with some red showing.

But something was wrong. Something out there at the flagpole wasn't right. I could just barely make out the faces of the detail men, but I could see they looked bewildered and frightened. And they're looking at their hands and I don't see anything in them now.

I run toward the pole with the sergeant close behind. When I get there, I shout, "Where's the flag?" and stand there throwing dirty, field-grade looks at the PFC's.

One of the PFC's tried to speak. "Sir, we were—uh."

The second PFC, under somewhat better control, said, "We

were folding it, sir, when—"

I remembered the folding drill and asked, "Did you fold the lower striped section of the flag over the blue field?"

"Yes, sir!" the PFC's snapped together.

"Then did you fold the folded edge over to meet the open edge?"

"Yes, sir!"

I don't know why I was going through that lengthy routine—right out of the book. I guess I was afraid of what they'd answer when I got to my last question. So I pushed ahead with it. "Okay. Now, did you start a triangular fold by bringing the striped corner of the folded edge to the open edge?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then fold the outer point inward, parallel with the open edge, to form a second triangle?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then continue folding until the entire length of the flag was formed into a triangle with only the blue field and heading showing?"

"Yes, sir!"

"All right, all right. Now, then, did you tuck the remaining heading into the pocket formed by the folds at the blue field edge of the flag?"

"Yes, sir!" the PFC's answered.

"The properly folded flag then resembled a cocked hat?"

I couldn't believe it. One of those goms actually tried to be funny. "Well, sir," he said, "we didn't try it on."

"Don't be flippant." I went on threateningly, "You're in enough hot water as it is. Did it *look like*, not *was it*, a cocked hat? When viewed from above?"

"Yes, sir!" the PFC's sang out once more.

Now I was right up to the question I didn't want to ask. I asked it anyway; I had to. "Then where, men, where is the flag?" My voice had a note of pleading in it. I tell you, Mr. Monahan, I would have settled, then and there, for the admission of a joke, a very bad joke, understand, but only a joke. I longed to hear the PFC's say they had hidden the flag somewhere, although how this was possible on the broad, open field was beyond me. Clearly, I was looking for some answer other than the one I got.

"We don't know, sir," one of the PFC's said.

"We only meant it as a joke, sir," the other said.

Aha! This was more like it, this was what I wanted to hear. I recomposed myself, dropped the stern stance I had been taking and adopted one of understanding for the occasional nutty behavior of troops.

"A joke," I said. "I see, a joke. Well, even officers—even *field grade* officers—enjoy a good joke

as much as the next fellow. But funny time is over, soldiers. Now, where is the flag?"

"But that's it, sir, we don't know," one of them wailed.

"Only a joke," the other one muttered.

"Explain this joke!" I ordered, back to the stern stance.

One of them obliged me. "Well, sir, after we had it looking like a cocked hat, after we had folded it so many times—that sort of gets to you, that folding—we decided, only a joke, to fold it once more. It should have been hard because the bundle was now so bulky. But it was easy. This surprised us and we tried to fold it again, and did! We kind of kept on till the flag was nothing but a handkerchief in our hands, then a tab of cloth, and then—"

"Nothing!" croaked the other PFC.

"Nothing?" I asked.

"Nothing," whispered the sergeant behind me.

"Nothing," one of the PFC's said.

"It disappeared?"

"Yes, sir. Vanished."

"Tenshun!" I screamed suddenly. "Ah—boot face!" My voice broke on the last word.

The PFC's snapped to and executed precisely the about-face. They were now stiffly at attention, facing the flagpole.

"Now, you two," I snarled ominously, "stand right there at

ten-hut till you figure out where the flag went to and get it back."

I moved away from the PFC's and walked slowly toward the headquarters building. As I walked, I groped behind me and grasped the arm of the sergeant of the guard and drew him abreast of me. He must have been embarrassed by this familiarity. Fennesi laughed and said, "A couple of clowns, eh, sir?"

I said, "My God, sergeant, right here before my eyes is the story of my life. I've been in public information all my time in the army. I've been reporting dull little stories about Cook of the Month, The Officers' Wives Club springtime bazaar, the senior post civilian getting his forty-year pin, and now when I get a really big story, I can't touch it. Don't want to touch it." I stopped walking and looked at him. "What do you think happened, sergeant?"

"I just don't know, sir. Mysterious things are happening all the time in this world."

"I agree. Want me to tell you what I think? I think it happened. I think that flag went—poof!"

"Poof, sir?"

"Poof."

We resumed walking toward the headquarters building. "What's it mean, sir?" the sergeant asked.

"How the hell do I know, sergeant," I answered irritably. "Pinkos. Congress. The General Accounting Office. Dissidents. Maybe the navy. Someone or something that does not wish the army well. Maybe the flag's disappearing was a message, an oracle, a portent of something to come." I stopped a bit and reflected that perhaps it was not wise to share these possibilities with someone else. Then I went on, "At any rate, I've got to get to the bottom of it. I have to hope that flag will materialize before tomorrow when the new OD takes the flagroom inventory. Maybe I'll go down there and see if it's shown up."

"Let me do that for you, sir," the sergeant said and raced ahead of me and through the entrance doors of the headquarters building. He was back in minutes, shaking his head.

I nodded toward the flag detail. "Dismiss those two birds, sergeant. Tell them to go back to their barracks and wait there. There may be questions, though I may be able to field them alone."

"Yes, sir."

"And, sergeant."

"Yes, sir?"

"Tell them it's all right. Not to worry. You go back to the guardhouse. I'll call you if I need you. But I'll try to keep you—and them—out of it."

"Thank you, sir."

I may have dramatized Ramy's account, but that's the way it came over to me and that's the way I put it down, edited here and there a bit. When he had finished, he picked up his glass and drained off his drink, though the ice in it had long melted and what was in the glass must have been pretty flat.

"I drove around and then I thought of you and called," the major said. "The OD's not supposed to leave post, but I thought I'd take the chance. And now that I've said my confession, Father Monahan, give me my penance and I'll be getting back. I'm going to wake up the chief of staff and tell him what's happened. Then tomorrow I'll no doubt have a date with the general's carpet. Thanks for listening."

"Not so fast," I said. "Aren't you going to stick around for absolution? Is that all you wanted, to get the whole thing off your chest? Don't you want to know where the flag is?"

"You know where it is?"

"Of course."

"How can you be so sure? Look, I saw the flag go up the pole. I got back in time to see the detail folding it. And then when I went out on the field, it wasn't there and it had no place to go."

I took a deep breath and leaned forward on the table and said, "A friend of mine once told me that you can't describe a bear by getting inside it. That's a good way of becoming a bear, but not a very good way of describing one."

I could see Ramy was getting impatient. "Excuse my bluntness, Mr. Monahan, but what the hell's all that got to do with my disappearing flag?"

"What I'm saying is this: you can't describe a problem as long as you're a part of it. What you've been telling me is less how the flag got into the missing category, and more what you saw."

"Aren't they the same thing?"

"If they were, you wouldn't be sitting here. Anyway, I know where the flag went and I believe it's still there."

"I'll settle for that."

"If I tell you, do I get first dibs on any interesting leads at Fort Custis. They have to be *something I can use*, remember."

"I'll call you first, honest to God!" he said and crossed his heart. "Now, tell me where the flag is, Mr. Monahan, before someone at Custis misses me."

It was nice to see that; I didn't think anyone did that any more. My father always trusted people who said Honest to God! and crossed their hearts.

So, I told Major Ramy where the flag was.

That night I got two calls. The first was from Ramy. He had found his flag. It was where I told him it was. His talk verged on the blubbery grateful so I got off the phone before the conversation turned lachrymose. The phone rang again just as I took my hand off it.

That's why the next night, Monday, I found myself again at the White House, sitting at the same table I had sat at the night before with Major Ramy. Across from me, his hands large and grotesque as refracted through the amber density of a pitcher of beer, sat a man with a long dark face and sharp dark eyes that looked at me suspiciously.

"I was with Ramy last night when he found the flag," Sergeant Fennesi said. "He told me you told him where it was. What I want to know is how much more did you tell him, because I guess you have it all figured out."

"Major Ramy found out one thing and one thing only: where he could find the flag."

"You mean he didn't ask for any explanation?"

"He had his own explanation."

"You're kidding."

"A clue to his state of mind is that he kept talking about a disappearing flag, never a missing flag."

"So, if the flag could disappear—"

"It could reappear," I concluded. "It could be expected to materialize somewhere."

Fennesi poured himself a glass of beer from the pitcher. I noticed he didn't offer me any. He drank off the whole glass before he said, "I can't buy it. Ramy's really thinking the flag vaporized and re-formed somewhere else."

I settled back in my chair. I had decided I'd have a drink after Fennesi left. "Like myself," I said, "Major Ramy is a newsman. The only difference is, he wears a uniform. One thing a lot of newsmen love is to get a fact and twist it all out of shape. If you doubt that, tune in any night to the evening news. This tendency to tinker with the truth happens because most newspeople are romantics. For them, consciously or otherwise (otherwise, in the case of our major), truth is a starting point, not the shining finality it is for the rest of us."

"You're a newsman," Fennesi said. "You a romantic?"

"I just intimated I wasn't. If I were, I couldn't have told you all that. The one thing romantics can't see is that they are. On the other hand, I'm sure none of us is at one or the other end of the pole. We're all somewhere in between. If we weren't, where would faith be?"

Fennesi poured himself another beer. There was about an inch of liquid at the pitcher's bottom now. This time he swallowed half the glass before saying, "Well, Monahan, I'm sorry to contradict you. I'm at one of the absolute ends of that pole. Guess which end."

"I think I know which end and I think I believe you. Otherwise, you wouldn't have taken the storm flag down within moments of putting it up."

"Have you ever folded a wet flag and then had to unfold it and dry it out later?"

"I didn't think that was the point of running it up, to keep it dry. A flagpole's not a wash-line."

Fennesi finished what beer he had in his glass, dumped the remainder from the pitcher into the glass, and drank this, too. He wiped his lips, transferred the wet from his fingers to a napkin.

"What made you jump on me as the bad guy?" he asked at last.

"A lot of things. You were the person in authority after Major Ramy. You were in charge of both details, the garrison flag detail and the storm flag detail. You knew that yesterday the post was off, no one was around to see you order the storm flag taken back down. And anyone passing by the pole that afternoon wouldn't, in any case, have

been able to see the flag. Even if it were up there, it wouldn't be visible in the fog. You probably expected that Major Ramy, like other OD's, would content himself with operating out of his quarters or the officers' club when he wasn't making his prescribed rounds. You didn't know of his love of ceremony, that he'd make a special effort to try to be there at retreat to watch the flag come down. Lucky for you he was late. And clever of you to have the flag detail out on the field going through the motions. He convinced himself that he saw the flag out there, but he was looking with more than his eyes. He expected to see a flag, so he saw a flag. But what you didn't expect was for the PFC's to get nervous and Major Ramy to go out there to see what was up. Why didn't you bring the folded flag from the flagroom and go through the motions with that?"

"I thought of that and would have brought it out except for the MP's."

"The MP's?"

Fennesi picked up his glass and looked at it; then looked at me. I ignored this silent and obvious message. Let him buy his own beer, if he wanted more. My information was more valuable to him than his was to me. Furthermore, I didn't want to drink with Fennesi.

"Okay, then," he said finally,

"the MP's. A military police detail, two men, fire the retreat cannon. It's located across the street in the corner of another field, oh, maybe two hundred yards away. Close enough for gross, but not fine detail. They would have noticed it if we had gone *out there* carrying a flag. When the anthem ends, the flag is still coming down the pole. If there had been a flag, they wouldn't have seen it for a good part of the way down the pole because of the fog. I knew that, right after the anthem, they cover the cannon, then get in their jeep and take off. At that point, there's no reason for them to watch us and they don't. Then Ramy has to appear and screw things up. But he fell for that story, did he, those two detail guys cooked up?"

"I'm afraid he did," I said.

Fennesi shook his head wonderingly, and I'm sure Major Ramy's stock fell considerably in the sergeant's mind. I had the impression, though, that no one's stock got high points in Fennesi's mind.

"Anything else, Monahan?" he asked. "I've got things to do yet tonight."

"You're the one who called the meeting, not I."

"Oh, wow, 'not I' yet. It's a pleasure to hear the language spoke as she's supposed to be spoke. Okay, I called this here meeting. So, one last question.

What else you got?"

"Your obliging nature was suspicious."

Fennesi didn't say anything, just raised his eyebrows.

I explained. "You volunteered to go to the flagroom for Major Ramy to look for the missing colors."

"So, what if he had gone?"

"You know the answer to that one. He would have found the flag in its proper place, neat and dry and folded. Exactly where he found it last night after I told him where it was. If he'd found it earlier, he would have been suspicious. But finding it later in the flagroom, *after you had assured him it wasn't there*, convinced him it had rematerialized."

"You think, three hours before retreat, I walked across that field with that flag and down the corridors of the headquarters building and put it back in the flagroom? What if I was seen?"

"What were the chances of that? The post is a dead city on Sunday. But even if you were seen carrying a flag into the headquarters, no one would suspect anything *because you were supposed to be carrying a flag*, the huge garrison flag which the special detail had just folded. Anyone seeing you couldn't know, though, that you were carrying *two* flags, the smaller bundle of the storm flag

hidden in the larger bundle of the garrison flag."

"You enjoy playing Sherlock Holmes?"

"No," I answered, "Father Brown."

Fennesi stood up and looked down at me in a vaguely threatening way. "Okay, you've got it all figured. And I guess you're thinking I should be grateful for your not telling Ramy. But I know who you're thinking about. Not me. So, if the story got out, my ass would hang high but he'd be the laughing-stock of the post. Standoff."

I guess I thought it was philosophy time. I looked up at Fennesi, calmly I hoped, and said, "Are we more in danger from those who believe too much, sergeant, or from those, like yourself, who believe too little?"

Fennesi gave me the finger and said something unprintable in my direction, then walked out of the place. When he had gone, Mr. Piacevole came over to clear my table even though the table had a regular server. He took away Fennesi's glass and the pitcher and moved a damp cloth vigorously over the table surface that had come in contact with the sergeant. He

took a few brisk and unnecessary swipes at the chair in which Fennesi had sat. Then he asked if I cared for anything. I ordered a bottle of the local beer. He brought it, and a frosted glass. He poured the beer, and then stood there a while, his dark-brown Italian eyes on me. He was older than I, silver-haired, not gray. His face was squarish and lightly pocked and his nose large and hooked, almost too large for his face. He always looked at you as if you were his only customer, his only concern.

"Everything all right, Mr. Monahan?" he said. "Those two men, yesterday and today."

"No problem, Mr. Piacevole," I said. "That man last night, he lost his flag, but he found it."

"The fellow tonight, he lost a flag, too?"

"He never had a flag."

Mr. Piacevole went back to the bar and I sat at the table a long while drinking many beers, luxuriating in the unchanging environment of the White House. Maybe I had a bottle or so too many because Mr. Piacevole had one of his sons drive me home where my sister, Maureen, was waiting up for me.

I, Witness



by Nancy Pickard

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Steve Krebs was stopped at a traffic signal on Ward Parkway, in the middle of three lanes of cars heading into Kansas City, when he happened to glance out his rolled-up window, through the rain, at the torrent pouring down Brush Creek. In that instant, he saw a man run to the edge of the flooding stream. What happened next was so shocking to Steve, and occurred so quickly, that he nearly didn't believe it, or even that he had seen it.

Between the changing of the

traffic signal and the first surge of vehicles through the water in the intersection, Steve saw the man step to the very edge of the water.

Between the lifting of Steve's foot from the brake to the gas pedal, the man bent his knees, flung both of his arms back, and leaned forward at his waist.

Between the refusal of Steve's mind to believe what it was seeing and then its stunned acceptance, the man flung his arms straight out in front of him. His feet left the ground. Between the honking of the car

behind him and Steve's responding pressure on his gas pedal, the man dived into the water that looked ten feet deep and twenty feet out of its banks—deadly, urgent water that was furiously propelled by six days of rain.

No. Steve's mind recoiled, rebelled. No. No!

He unconsciously turned his steering wheel in the same direction he was looking, and nearly side-swiped the car to his left. The driver leaned on her horn and stared at him before shooting ahead, away from the threat of his car. Shaking now, Steve straightened the steering wheel and pulled his car back between the white lines of the middle lane.

Hadn't anybody else seen it?

He risked a glance at the driver in the car to his right, but she was talking to her passenger, and laughing. He glanced across Brush Creek, to the traffic going in the opposite direction on the other side of the flooding waters, but nobody had stopped over there, either. Nobody was getting out of their cars and racing down the banks to the creek. Nobody honked frantically. Nobody in any of the cars surrounding him looked over at him in shared, stunned shock. Didn't anybody else see it? he wondered again.

His mind tried to refuse it again: Why would anybody dive

into that flood? Nobody would do that. It was suicide. He'd never make it to the other bank. Steve felt helpless and shocked. People had been swept into Brush Creek and died in other floods. God. Oh God. He should stop and go back and try to help, his emotions cried. But how could he stop, his mind argued, with so much traffic around him? In this rain, in rush hour, there was no place to pull over. And what would he do if he did stop? He couldn't dive in after the man because then they'd both drown. In a small corner of his mind a voice murmured, two minutes ago you were just a tired man driving home like everybody else. If you'd kept your eyes on the road, you wouldn't even have seen it.

But he had seen it. In that moment, when the traffic had slowed down, he had looked to his left to check the progress of the flood in the creek, and he had seen it. It was terrible, and terrifying, how a person's whole life could change completely in just a single moment, in just a moment! One minute you were alive, the next minute you were dead, one minute you had a job or a wife or a home, and the next you were fired or divorced or homeless, one minute you were safe, the next you weren't...

There was no red speck in the

side mirror now as he approached the curve that led to the Alameda Plaza Hotel—only cars, rain, and more cars.

With a shaking right hand, Steve turned down the sound of the newscaster on National Public Radio and rolled his window down a couple of inches, letting in a cold spray that wet the side of his forehead, but outside there was no sound of shouting in the rain.

What can I *do*? he thought. But he knew it might be too late for that question, and that the more accurate one was: What could I have done?

In a couple of blocks he would reach the lower entrance to the hotel parking lot. He would stop there and call 911, he decided. But as he drove on, prevented from hurrying by the traffic, he thought: In a couple of blocks, that man could drown. He could be dying now. He could be dead. God. Help him. But as much as he meant that, Steve also meant: Help me!

The north entrance to the hotel was now half a block ahead of him. He managed to slide over to the right-hand lane and then to turn into the lot. Once inside the covered entrance, he parked in the circle drive and raced into the lower level of the hotel. He felt like shouting, "Help! Somebody's drowning! A man dived into the creek!" But figuring that would be more

dramatic than efficient, he ran to the public phones, endured a strange, surrealistic moment of searching for a quarter's worth of change in his pockets, and punched in the emergency number.

"Nine-eleven."

"I just saw a man dive into Brush Creek." He tried to sound calm but urgent. "Has anybody called you about this?"

"No, sir."

"Oh. Well, I saw him dive in and it's really flooded there, I mean the water's going incredibly fast, and it's, uh, I don't know exactly where to tell you, but you know where the creek runs out of Kansas onto the Missouri side?" He didn't wait for her to affirm it. "Well, it's just west of the Plaza, you know? Between State Line and, uh, I think the first bridge, I guess. That's where he went in, although, God, he'd be a lot farther downstream by now if he didn't manage to get out. He was a white man." Steve felt self-conscious saying that to the operator, who sounded black to him. "He was wearing blue-jeans and a red shirt, I think it was red, and he wasn't real tall, and he was maybe youngish, I don't know, maybe in his twenties." He was beginning to feel foolish in the face of her silence. "Uh, do you need to know anything else?"

"No, sir."

"Do you want my name, or my address?"

"No, sir. Thank you."

"Oh, well, you're welcome."

He hung up, feeling unsatisfied. Had she grasped the urgency of the situation? Maybe she didn't think it *was* urgent. Maybe people jumped into Brush Creek all the time, five or six a day, and they came out of it alive. Maybe this was no big deal to the cops, nothing even for him to be so concerned about. No, that couldn't be true. She was just used to life and death emergencies, and he wasn't.

Steve breathed deeply, stuck his hands in the pockets of his raincoat, and walked self-consciously back to his car. He wondered if any of the other people in the reception area had overheard him. He felt kind of important, although he also felt like ducking his head and running out before anybody got a good look at him. He wondered whether they thought he was a good citizen for reporting the incident. A lot of people wouldn't have done that much. Think of all those cruel people in New York who'd ignored that poor woman who was being killed. Or would they think he was a coward because he only called for help, because he hadn't actually tried to rescue the man who dived into the creek?

I couldn't stop! he wanted to protest.

Instead of getting back into his car, he walked up to the edge of the sidewalk outside the hotel. From there, he could see the traffic and the Country Club Plaza shopping center on the far side of Brush Creek, but he couldn't see the creek itself. He could hear it, though, even over the noise of the rain and the traffic. It was a frightening sound, he couldn't imagine diving into that sound. Normally, Brush Creek was only a trickle of water in the manmade storm drainage system that bisected Kansas City. It was a strangely beautiful creek for one that ran in a cement bed and was basically only a storm sewer. In the Plaza area where he stood, it was arched by elegant bridges and lined by gentle, green, tree-lined slopes. There were tennis courts along the banks of the creek, and playgrounds. On summer Sundays families brought their blankets and thermoses to listen to free concerts in the creekbed that was now under swiftly rising water.

A few years before, the creek had climbed so far out of its banks that it flooded the stores across the street, and had even flooded down into the hotel where Steve had placed his call. Cars had washed into the creek. People had drowned. He himself had been prevented from reaching home that terrible night because of flood waters in

his path, and he had spent the night at a friend's house north of the Plaza. He remembered how disorienting it had been to see waters like lakes in the intersections where he usually drove home from work. And how terrifying it had been to think that he could have been washed out of his car and drowned, just trying to get home.

Home. Mirian would be wondering where he was by now. Not worrying, necessarily, or caring, but maybe wondering. He should have called her, too.

Hunching down into the collar of his coat, he stepped out onto the sidewalk, into the rain, and then kept walking until he could see the flood waters.

Cars splashed by him, their occupants staring at him.

I must look like a lunatic, he thought, standing out here in this downpour. He searched for a red shirt floating by, or a man in a red shirt clambering up on the banks of the creek, soaked but safe. The only red he saw was in the stop lights at the intersection of Brush Creek and Wornall Road. After they changed three times, he turned around and walked back to his car. On the drive home, he turned up the heater full blast to dry his shoes, socks, and pantlegs. Eventually, they stopped dripping, but they stuck to his skin and felt clammy.

Is he dead? Steve wondered,

while a smaller, more urgent voice wondered, Am I a coward?

When he opened the door from the garage, Mirian Krebs lowered the evening newspaper onto her lap. She watched him remove his raincoat, which looked soaked, and hang it over the edge of the door.

With fast strides, he crossed the hall, then the den, and walked onto the screened-in porch where she sat in an armchair, her feet propped up on a hassock.

"Where have you been, Steve?"

"I saw a man jump into Brush Creek, Mirian!" It excited him to tell her, as if he had brought home a trophy to display to her. "I couldn't believe what I was seeing!" His hands and arms were moving in excited accompaniment to his words. "There I was, just driving along in the middle lane of Ward Parkway, and the traffic was so bad and the rain was pouring down, and I just happened to look at the creek. I mean, I just happened to look! And there he was, this guy in a red shirt and blue-jeans, and he dived in the creek. I couldn't believe it, Mirian. It was insane. The water's rushing down there, it's so deep and there are whitecaps, you know how it gets, it's just going un-

believably fast. He just dived in!"

She looked at him as she always did lately, which was without expression except for a cynical, wary twist to her mouth. In the face of that intimidating show of indifference, Steve blinked and looked away from her.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked.

"Why not?" she said in a bored tone. The newspaper rustled in her lap as she crossed her legs at the ankles. "It's dry on this side of the pool. I like the rain. I like the thunder and lightning. It's warm enough to sit out here."

"It's kind of weird, don't you think?" He could barely hear her words over the clamor of the rain. "I mean, to sit on a screened-in porch during a thunderstorm?"

The silence with which she greeted that remark lasted long enough for one long rumble of thunder and a crash of lightning. Their screened-in porch was a large one, built more like Florida than Missouri, and big enough to contain their swimming pool. Outside, the rain poured off the two patio umbrellas in solid sheets that looked like cellophane wrappers. We should have lowered those umbrellas, he thought. Down the block, an electric transformer crackled; a blue

glow flashed briefly around it. I hope we don't lose our power, he thought.

Finally she answered him, in a dry monotone in which each word sounded compressed with emotion, "Do you want to talk about weird, Steve?"

He stepped to the edge of the swimming pool and looked into the too-blue water. The rain blew through the screens just to the far side of the pool. That was funny, he thought—they could stay dry while going swimming. Steve turned around to face her, putting his back to the pool and the storm.

"Mirian, I keep thinking that I should have done something to help the guy, but I don't know what it would have been." He started pacing the side of the pool while she watched him, expressionless but for the twist to her mouth. "I couldn't very well stop the car in the middle of all that traffic, I might have caused a wreck, and then somebody would have been hurt for sure. And you know, there are only those big houses on the other side of the street, and maybe nobody was home for me to use their phone . . . So I had to go all the way to the Alameda to call 911 . . ."

She shrugged, the single gesture that chilled him the most, and said, "I think you did more than most people would have done, Steve."

He would have felt good about that if she hadn't then added, "You did what you could."

He knew that in her estimation that wasn't much.

"Have I missed the news?" he asked, looking at his watch at the same time. "No, good, maybe there'll be something on the news."

"I doubt it," she said.

"Why?" He crossed in front of her to turn on the set. "If somebody drowned or got rescued in Brush Creek, that would be big news. Look . . ."

She folded her hands on top of the newspaper with a resigned air and watched with him as the newscaster briefly summarized the major stories that would be covered. There was no mention of a rescue or a drowning in Brush Creek.

Steve switched to Channel Five, but found a weatherman talking about inches of rain and storm systems out west. There wasn't any mention of the story on Channels Nine or Forty-one, either.

"Well, that's good," he said, turning down the sound.

"It is?" She sounded amused. "Why?"

"Because nobody drowned, Mirian."

"Maybe they haven't found him yet. *Steve*."

There it was again, that sudden, vicious edge to her voice. He should ask her about it, he

knew he should, maybe she was even trying to goad him into confronting her about it, but he was afraid of that viciousness, he was afraid of how it might change his life.

He didn't want his life to change, so he looked away from her direct, level, waiting, brown-eyed gaze, and said, "Maybe there'll be something on the news tonight."

"There usually is."

Mirian! he thought.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"I thought we'd have chicken noodle soup and BLT's."

"That sounds good."

He wondered if that meant she would fix it. He was afraid to ask, for fear she'd say, "You break your arm? You can't open a can of soup?" But he was also afraid to start fixing it himself because she might say, "I can *fix* it. I was going to *fix* it, Steve."

He turned back around to face the pool, and tried to imagine it a torrent, and himself diving into it. She stared at his back.

"Why would anybody try to cross that creek, Mirian?"

"To get to the other side?"

"Very funny."

She sighed. "I don't know. Maybe he was drunk. Maybe he was high. Maybe he was crazy. Maybe he wanted to kill himself. Maybe he was diving for sunken treasure. Maybe he got

tired of sitting in rush-hour traffic and decided to swim . . .”

Steve turned around suddenly, his face tense. “What would you have done, Mirian?”

“I would already have been home from work, Steve,” she said with a sarcasm that started out slow and light and dry, but then built with each word into something as heavy and full and angry as the storm outside. The words seemed to get away from her, to get out from under her control so that each one was louder than the last, and by the end, she was screaming at him over the thunderous, pounding sound of the rain. “So I wouldn’t have seen it at all, Steve. I wouldn’t have been driving around aimlessly, pretending to be doing something, when in reality, I hadn’t done anything at all, all day. For days. Weeks. Months! I wouldn’t have seen it. I would have been too *busy*.”

Her last word was like a wasp driving its stinger into him, and he flinched with the pain of it. The force of her anger would have driven him back if he hadn’t already been standing on the edge of the swimming pool. He stared at her, feeling a terrible desperation and thinking, Here it comes, here it comes.

She got up from the chair and advanced toward him.

“What did you really do today, Steve? While you weren’t

rescuing drowning men, I mean? Drive around? Have coffee? Pretend to look for a job? Think up wild stories to come home and tell me, to justify your existence? Well, you don’t exist any more. Not for me. Not for yourself. Not for any reason that I can detect. You don’t live, you don’t feel, you don’t think, and God knows, you don’t work!”

He turned around to look at the pool.

“Face me!” She walked up to him, put her hands on his shoulders, tried to turn him around. “Face yourself. Please, Steve, for God’s sake . . .”

Carefully, he edged away from her. Without looking at her, he said, “I’ll start the soup,” and walked into the kitchen to prepare their dinner. The transformer down the street crackled, spit, and flashed blue. The lights went out and the television went dead.

He turned around to smile ruefully at her, and to shrug.

“Great,” Mirian said, gazing hopelessly out at the rainy night. “Perfect.”

There was nothing on the ten o’clock news about a drowning or a rescue, or even about anybody reported missing. The man must have climbed out on the other side and survived, Steve decided. He was ashamed of how let down he felt. He also felt

embarrassed that he'd gotten so excited over nothing. But it could have ended differently, he told himself, it could have ended tragically.

Earlier, he and Mirian had eaten peanut butter sandwiches and fruit salad by candlelight in the dining room, not saying much. A few times Mirian had tried to raise the topics of paying bills or selling the house or seeing a counselor, but each time Steve had brought the subject back to the man in the creek until finally she had given up.

"You're not only out of a job," she had said, "but also out of touch with reality. We can't stay here, Steve, we can't keep this up. Things have got to change."

But he didn't want anything to change, except the subject of her conversation. After the news, he asked her if she'd like to go for a swim in the pool.

She looked at him as if he were crazy. "There's a thunderstorm, Steve, in case you hadn't noticed. No, thank you. People don't usually go swimming in electrical storms." She laughed, a sound full of sarcasm. "Except maybe your man in the red shirt and bluejeans."

So he waited until after she'd gone to bed before he took his swim. He stood at the edge of the deep end of the pool for a long moment, then he flung his

arms behind him, bent his knees, leaned forward at the waist, and pushed off into a dive. He was fully clothed. The water was warm and it dragged at his clothes and he felt his shoes filling with it. He dived deep, until he touched the bottom with the fingertips of both hands, and then he surfaced quickly, pushing his head above the surface as if there were waves to surmount. He swam the length of the pool in quick, strong strokes, and then reversed his course. Again, again. He continued doing laps while the rain poured outside, and now and then the thunder rumbled and the lightning brightened the dark porch.

"Steve! What are you doing! Get out of there!"

Under his arm, he saw Mirian standing at the edge of the pool in her nightgown. She looked frightened. He pulled himself to the edge of the pool where she stood staring down at him.

"What's the matter with you?" She began to cry, and he reached out tenderly to touch her bare ankle. He was so grateful for this display of emotion, of kind emotion, for him. "Oh, Steve," she cried, "look at you, you still have all your clothes on."

Mirian bent down to hold her hands out to him, to help him out of the pool. Gratefully, he placed his weight in her small,

shaking hands, allowing her to tug at him. Rescue me, he thought, rescue me. She pulled, but he was too heavy and the tile around the pool was too slick. Mirian slipped, falling not into the pool with him, but onto the side of it. Her head struck the tile, bounced, struck it again, and then fell into the water in the deep end of the pool. Mirian lay on her back, her head half under water, her hair floating. There was no choking, no attempt to breathe. She lay still. The water distorted things, making the top of her head look too large for her chin, which was out of the water. Her blood trickled into the swimming pool, turning the artificial blue a strange dark purple. Steve recoiled from it. He climbed out of the pool quickly before it touched him, and then pulled her out of the water by her feet. She wasn't breathing. He was sure she wasn't ever going to breathe again. He ran dripping into the kitchen to dial 911. But with his hand on the receiver, he looked down at himself.

They would ask why he had gone swimming with his clothes on. It would seem crazy. They would think he was crazy, that he had killed Mirian, that he had pulled her down on purpose.

"Oh, Mirian," he wept to the dial tone. "I'm sorry."

He couldn't let it happen. His life would change too much, and he didn't want his life to change.

Steve hung up the phone without calling 911. He walked, dripping, into their bedroom and rummaged through her closet. He didn't want the police seeing her like that, wearing that nightgown. He thumbed the hangers until he found a nice pair of bluejeans that she looked good in and a pretty red plaid shirt and her tennis shoes, and he carried them back onto the screened-in porch. After he had cleaned her and dressed her, he carried her to his car and laid her down gently in the back seat. Then he drove through the rain to the far east side of Kansas City, Missouri, where Brush Creek empties into the Little Blue River.

The next morning he called the police.

"Please." His voice shook with tears and exhaustion. He hadn't slept but had spent the rest of the night draining the pool, cleaning it, covering it with its canvas top. Outside, it was still raining. "My wife didn't come home from work last night, and I'm so worried about her. She's been depressed lately. The last time I saw her, she was wearing bluejeans and a red shirt. Have you . . . have you . . . had any reports of anybody fitting that description?"

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Photography by Edward Weston © 1981 Arizona Board of Regents/Center for Creative Photography

These boots are made for . . . flying? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the July Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

Liftwing's Young Wife

by Ann F.
Woodward



It was a spring day of seeping rain and chill ugliness in which there were no positive elements. The dashing winds of yesterday were finished; there was no satisfying drip and gurgle of the kind of steady rain that promises full paddies for the rice fields and general benefit; the air was not soft as plumped silk, as spring-time dampness can be, but cutting and raw. Wetness stained and slicked and glared on the wood of the verandah and the posts, on the garden rocks, and the bridge over the pond. The pines were black in the dull mist.

Lady Aoi kept herself solitary on such days, feeling that she would surely quarrel without cause or weep for no reason if she were in company. She had at first had the shutters closed, but the gloom of her room had been so depressing that she had asked O-hana to have them opened again. The warm brazier was no comfort, oddly, the charcoal seeming to her only a collection of ashy chunks whose heat was masked. She felt that if a bright bird were to fly into the garden or a flower of definite color were to nod in the wind, all would be focused and the day would fall into its proper place as a surrounding and contrasting setting for one sparkling moment of event. This rain was boredom distilled.

Why, then, was she not enlivened when O-hana brought her a message from the prince? He was here to see his wife, to whom Aoi was lady-in-waiting, and he must talk with Aoi before he left. He had a rather difficult request.

It must have been the strange wording of this phrase that made her reluctant to see him. A request difficult to make? Difficult to fulfill? In any case, something she would not be pleased to hear, she felt, and as O-hana smoothed her hair and lifted and freshened her robes, Aoi sat turning and flexing, as if she would suddenly leave and burrow behind her curtains, claiming to be unwell. He was her good friend, though, and she would use only a fan for protection of her mood. If she were to receive him from behind a concealing curtain, he would be offended.

And here he came, just that bright, polished flash and stir of life for which she had been longing. His lacquered hat, his bound-up hair were glossy black, his robes sumptuous and figured, red color glowing next to blue, blue color deepened by green, all sharpened by a thin strip of white at the neck. He smiled with the pleasure of seeing her, and she became the jewel of the dull day, transformed, warmed with gratitude and her own joy in his presence. She knew that whatever his difficult request might be, she would do it.

So it was that Aoi went to live for a while in the Fourth Ward mansion of the prince's youngest brother. The prince had explained:

"It is the little princess my brother has lately married. You know that she is still almost a child and that he took her because her father is ill and wanted to give her, before he dies, to someone he could trust."

Aoi knew the story of this princess. Her father was the retired emperor and some years before, when his illness first began, he had decided to become a monk. Recently, just before his full retreat from the world, he had made a great effort to provide reliable husbands for his three daughters. Only the youngest had given him any problem. Her mother had been the favorite concubine of his old age, resented by his other wives and mistreated in his palace, though he had done what he could to protect her. Because the mother's family was without influence, he had taken special care in choosing a protector for this youngest daughter. The prince's brother, when approached, had already been happily married and had protested that he could simply assume guardianship instead of marrying her. But the emperor, pitifully weak and distraught, had insisted on firm bonds; so the young princess had received the customary three overnight visits, the last of which had been celebrated with festive rice cakes, and the marriage was done.

"People laugh," the prince said to Aoi. "They say this proves my brother's greediness, that he could not resist taking another lady after all, especially a royal one, though he has been devoting himself for some time now—mostly—" the prince smiled because of the necessity of this qualifying word, "to one wife." The prince's brother had been called Liftwing behind his back when he was younger because of his flittings from affair to affair. A family characteristic, Aoi thought. This middle-aged prince now beside her still caused much unhappiness by his continuing involvements with women. It was in order to spare herself exposure to his other wives and concubines, to his absences, his comings and goings, that Aoi's mistress, who was principal wife, lived here in her own house. But the younger brother called Liftwing had given up other enthusiasms, or so Aoi had heard.

"They say his principal wife is unhappy, though she doesn't speak against the new wife," he went on, sighing. "He tells me that really he cannot be much interested in this little princess, she is so childish and ill-educated. On the other hand, he cannot neglect

her and offend her father. And now this trouble . . .”

The trouble was that the girl lay unmoving in her room and would not respond to anyone. Her nurse, who had come with her to her new home, had been injured when the Fourth Ward burned in a huge fire in the autumn of the year before, and her wound had not healed, even after such a long time. Just recently she had become feverish and finally delirious and she had now been moved to her father's house to recover. Aoi was asked to take her place and to see if she could bring the young princess back to herself.

“But it seems a clear case of possession,” Aoi had protested. “Why doesn't he call the priests and the medium?”

The prince had only looked at her. “He has asked most particularly for you because you are known for healing and sensitive care of the sick. My wife can spare you for a few weeks.”

What he did not say, Aoi thought, was that his brother wanted to keep this trouble private, if he could. People would say he had failed to pay her enough attention or that his wife had cast spells. And he had had the other trouble of the fire, his house burned down and only recently rebuilt, his family scattered to the homes of various relatives in the interim. Aoi could not refuse to help, though she preferred not to leave the peace of her mistress's house. She found herself bargaining in a gentle way.

“Will I have a room of my own?”

“I will see to it.”

“And I may take O-hana with me?” She felt she would need her own woman to deal with the strange household.

“Yes, of course.”

“And I will not be responsible if she doesn't improve?”

“He will call the priests if you say he must.”

“And the princess has said I may leave?”

He had smiled. “Lady, isn't there packing to be done before you come with me? I know you never go anywhere without your chest of scrolls and your box of medicines.”

Though she had been somewhat prepared by the prince's remarks, Aoi was shocked at the tiny size and obvious immaturity of the girl. The picture she had been given was inaccurate in one respect. She was not lying down but sitting motionless on her straw-mat platform in the center of the main room of her apartment in the young prince's house. Her clothes were sober, not of the gay colors young women wear, but blue and gray, poorly matched. Her hair was fine and fell flat against her shoulders, spreading out

untidily around her on the mat. In both hands cupped together she held something red, which Aoi later discovered to be a worn paper camellia, its stamens gone and in its center a huge round pearl.

Aoi had sent written greetings to the young prince on her arrival and had asked him *not to come for a while* to the princess's part of the house. So she entered alone and found the room filled with women attendants. She was never sure how many there were because they were always in motion, leaving the room and coming back, whispering together in groups, some of them crying, moving forward to speak to the princess and retreating in distress when she would not answer them or when her cold stillness made them afraid to touch her. They were all hostile to Aoi when she was brought among them. Aoi understood that they knew they had been chosen for their breeding, accomplishments, and good sense and that the arrival of a stranger implied that they were inadequate in this situation. After her greeting and explanation to the princess, who was completely unresponsive, she sat with them for that whole first afternoon, speaking quietly with one or two at a time, letting them tell her what had been happening.

"How long has she been like this?" she asked.

"Since Koma left. Koma is her nurse, who has been with her since she was born."

"Her mother died when she was only seven, you know, and Koma is very devoted."

"Yes, it was pitiful to see how she tried to hide her suffering. But finally one day she could not stand, they say."

"We don't know the details, but Koma went back into the house after it caught fire last fall and a beam fell on her."

Exchanging glances, they told her that Koma had been a little odd since the fire.

"Her hair was burned on one side and when it came back in it was white."

"She's had much experience with fires, more than most of us, and she seems always to have just escaped. She was slightly crippled once . . ."

"For two days the princess has sat there, on her knees." The lady began to cry. "She has had no food or water, she has not spoken, and we . . ."

Three ladies separately told Aoi in secret that they all knew it was the jealous wife in the northern apartment who had sent her spirit to possess the girl. "Though," one of them added, "he certainly

doesn't come here often enough to cause that other one to worry."

"Oh?" said Aoi.

"Yes, it's a scandal." The lady closed her lips primly and said no more.

Aoi listened to all of them and sympathized. Yet when she did what she knew was necessary, they were angry. She asked them to send for a light and then to leave her alone with the still figure on the platform. They left with protests and suspicious looks. O-hana closed the door on them and sat beside it in the dimness of the late afternoon.

The lantern was a tall one with a paper shade and Aoi had had it set at the far edge of the platform. Taking a cushion from the floor, she put it near the girl and to one side, then slowly seated herself. She saw that white blotches sprang out on the girl's face, rimmed by angled purple lines. Inwardly she sighed, disliking her task.

After settling as comfortably as she could, Aoi sat at ease and looked at the princess. She had put herself to the side so as not to challenge her, she did not touch her or speak to her, she asked for no response. She was careful not to be perfectly still, as the girl was, but to shift from time to time, to look away and back again, to round her shoulders into a comfortable slump, to unclasp her hands and fold them again. The room darkened. O-hana, off in the shadows by the door, sat as quietly as the other two. A long time passed, during which Aoi heard the bowmen in the grounds thrum the hour.

Tension built in the girl until her quivering was visible. She drew more and more tightly into herself, her jaw sharp, lips flattened with the strain. The faded, white-edged paper petals of the red flower in her hands began to flutter and the pearl jumped in their center. When it shook out of the flower and rolled onto the mat, she moved finally, gasping in alarm, bending her head to stare at it. Aoi reached toward it. Then, as if the force that had been in her had in an instant crackled to the outside, she radiated enmity and turned on Aoi, crouched, her face distorted.

"Go away." Hoarse and whispering, the voice came with so little air, was spared so little energy that Aoi could barely hear it. Not answering, just able to stop a protective movement of her arm, she watched as the face smoothed and all the girl's attention turned to the pearl on the mat.

It was unusually large and, Aoi could now see, had an unevenness

on one side, a small textured area, as if tiny grains had been added in that one spot late in its life. Now all the girl's fanatic energy was concentrated on picking it up with thumb and middle finger and placing it back in its nest of red paper. After that, tiredness seemed to weigh in her and she looked at Aoi with heavy eyes.

"I want Koma."

"Yes, I know. It must be hard for you without her here."

"I suppose they think you will watch me?"

"Should I?"

The girl did not answer and Aoi was silent. After a long pause, this seemed to bother the princess.

"Don't you want to know why I did it?" she said.

"Why you were sitting for so long? That seems very clear. We all get frightened sometimes."

"You think you know a lot." The hoarse whispering quality returned in her voice and she spoke as if in a severely repressed scream. "You don't know anything, you're just a stupid woman they sent here to watch me."

"Perhaps you're right," Aoi said mildly.

"You think you can do what Koma does and it will be the same. They say I am grown up now, with a fine husband and no need of a nurse." She was all movement now, bending near, turning away, twitching her shoulders, but always careful to keep the pearl balanced in the flower.

"Koma knows you very well," Aoi said. "She loves you and will be with you again when she is healed. I could certainly never take her place."

There was another long pause. The girl calmed and straightened, her bearing became less childish. She turned her head away and said, "My husband is very attentive, he is always coming here to see me and leaving the northern lady by herself."

"He is very proud of you."

"My father told me I would love him."

"Ah."

"My father loves me but he is sick, he had to go to that temple."

"You miss him."

"He will die if I am not careful."

"You must be careful or your father will die?"

"I am not supposed to be sad to leave him. We mustn't be sad when someone dies."

"I am often sad because my husband died. That was a long time ago but I still feel sad sometimes."

The princess looked at her and away. "I am not sad." She began to caress the pearl, rolling it around on the red paper with the end of her finger. "This was my mother's." She held it up in its crumpled nest. "She lives in the Buddha's paradise on the moon. She said this would remind me that life is only a bridge to that place, that nothing here really matters. I am never sad."

"And you didn't mind leaving your father."

"I see him sometimes," and she smiled to herself.

In speaking of her parents, she had become still again and it seemed that she had spent all her energy. O-hana, who had been watching from her place beside the door, opened the bedding closet before Aoi could ask her to and took out several pallets. The bed was spread on the mats and the red flower with the pearl in its center was placed on a low stand within reach of the princess's hand. Beside it she put a small ceramic incense burner that was empty except for a little ash in the bottom. After lying down, the girl took from under her sash a square of silk so faded that it was impossible to tell what the original color had been. Holding it against her chin, she prepared to sleep, already almost unconscious. They loosened her clothing and Aoi massaged her legs and her back until they were sure she slept. All night they stayed with her but she did not waken.

The women, who had no doubt listened at the door, were half-admiring and half-fearful of Aoi in the morning. They believed that she had evicted a demon and that a lady should not know how to do such things. The young prince, informed of the cure, came rushing in even before the princess's bed was put away. He was almost in tears from the intensity of his relief.

Though he was not as handsome as his older brother, intelligence and a lively spirit were revealed in the animation of his face. It was when he spoke to her that Aoi understood his attractiveness. He looked at her with attention and, in spite of his emotion, spoke of her and not of himself.

"What a blessing that you came! We were right to have faith in you. You must have magical powers, to overcome such a strong demon."

His way of looking directly at her made her feel prized, she felt that he admired every angle of her face, every fold of her robes as distinctive only to her, that she, in this moment, was to him a treasure.

"Please," she said, "she has come out of the spell all by herself. She is here with us again because she wills it." Aoi was modest

but also anxious to deny that she had any unusual power. She was always said to be odd because of rumors that she could read and write Chinese, an ability thought masculine and unattractive in a woman, and she tried from habit to protect herself. In this case, she need not have bothered, the prince's attention had gone to the small figure on the raised mat in the center of the room. The princess was sitting dejectedly, as if waiting to be scolded for making mischief. Aoi saw that she straightened and bloomed a little when the prince's look engaged her. She also saw that the gaze moved critically to her untidy clothes and hair and that the girl turned away.

Once the princess was restored to normal behavior, Aoi found that she had almost no duties. The ladies attended the princess faithfully, helping her to dress, serving her food, but she liked to see Aoi in the late afternoons, at just the time when they had had their first encounter, and at bedtime. Not that she asked for them, she seemed never to make a request, but she had a way of saying a name and if that person was absent, the alert ladies would run and summon whoever it was. So Aoi and O-hana stayed in the young prince's house. Spring was advancing in its usual half-retreating way. There were days of warm sunshine, days of wind and rain, there was even, for a few hours, snow. One evening they were told that Koma was well enough to return and would come back the following day. The princess received the news almost indifferently, only sliding her eyes to the side and looking down. Aoi felt relieved that she and O-hana could now soon go home again, but she did not mention this departure to the girl.

On the night before Koma's return, Aoi opened a small drawer in the princess's chest of combs and cosmetics and found it full of dried grass and crushed leaves. Puzzled, she called O-hana, who said it was a mouse nest and cleaned out the drawer, not letting the princess see. They both wondered how a mouse could have entered such a closed space. The incense burner on the stand seemed to be smoking a little and when Aoi touched it, she found it warm. The girl said she liked to see it glow in the dark, and so she had put in coals from the brazier. Thinking it sad that the princess, though married, was still so much a child, Aoi only nodded, noting that actually very little glow escaped the lid. The red flower with the pearl in it could barely be seen when the lantern was removed.

The night was windy and Aoi did not sleep well. In the morning

O-hana reported that there was quarreling in the kitchen because the maids had been accused of forgetting to bank the cooking fire. The princess's ladies, when Aoi joined them, were subdued and casting alarmed glances at each other. Koma had arrived before dawn and now sat off in a corner of the princess's room, given the unwilling attention of them all. Nurses who accompanied young women into marriage were customarily resented by ladies-in-waiting, and indeed they were often meddlesome and proprietary. Koma had the further disadvantage that her appearance was strange.

As the women had said, her hair was white on one side, not only white but short and bushy, so that it sprang out in a cascade onto her shoulder. But almost as arresting was her face, which was unusually wide at the cheekbones and fell into deep hollows below. Her mouth seemed caught in at one side of the lower lip but was full and smooth elsewhere. The general impression was of emaciation which made her eyelids and mouth contrast strongly by their full plump roundness—the roundness of youth. Aoi was startled by this thought and looked at Koma's hands. But they too had been scarred by the fire. She thought, though, that Koma was not an old woman.

As she spoke to her in greeting, Aoi found that her manner was awkward. She knew who Aoi was and why she was there and she began at once to thank her for coming and to apologize for having left the princess. Her words were polite, but lack of animation and expression made them almost rude. Her lips barely moved, her eyes watched the princess.

The ladies were still dressing their young mistress and Aoi sat to one side as they proposed a costume of red and violet. The princess would not agree or disagree with any of their proposals for combinations of robes, saying "If you say so," or "If you like," but she seemed to influence what was done for her by subtle facial expressions, of pleasure or unhappiness. The more she left the choices to them, the more her ladies fretted and fussed. Finally she was dressed, with a coat of Chinese brocade over the layers of robes, some of the women exclaiming in delight at the result, some worrying that the colors were too bright and that she would not feel comfortable all day. Aoi saw the girl glance at Koma and smile. It was not an attractive look, but smug and lofty.

Her husband came before the women had quite finished brushing her hair and he called out from the anteroom that it was time for her koto lesson. His voice was a little too loud. He spoke briefly to

Aoi as she passed by him after the other ladies.

"She seems more like herself?"

"Oh yes." Aoi, of course, had not known his young wife before and could hardly say what was normal for her, but she thought his manner impatient and she wanted to be reassuring. "She is waiting with pleasure for your visit. Look, she has dressed especially for you." And turning to see the princess in her stiff coat, Aoi realized that the bright clothes made her look even more immature, the collars of the many layers standing up at the back of her neck, the skirts angled and stiff around her thin form. She was at the moment trying to clutch the edges of her sleeves so as to hide her hands, a lady's trick she had not yet mastered. Aoi admitted to herself that the princess looked childish and awkward.

With a slight "Huh!" of exasperation, the young prince made a mannerly bow and advanced into the room, followed by his man carrying his koto. Koma, limping across the floor, was bringing the princess's koto and was caught with the long, unwieldy instrument in her arms when he entered. Aoi saw her dismayed expression as she tried to put it down and bow to him, and she hurried away before she could hear the prince's loud, forced tones again.

At bedtime that night the ritual was broken. Aoi came with O-hana to lay out the pallets, as they had been doing, but of course that was Koma's duty and she had already done it. The table with the red flower and the incense burner was left against the wall. The pearl was gone. Koma moved about the room silently, seeming to follow some ritual of her own, running her hands under, along and around the shelves and chests, opening and closing drawers. Her strange shock of white hair, her white, hollowed face were ghostly in the gloom. The princess liked Aoi's massage but indicated that she should stop early. O-hana picked up the tall lantern as they prepared to leave. Koma moved the brazier also out of the room, taking it to the anteroom where she would sleep. O-hana turned to Aoi a blank face, shocked at this selfishness. The girl was already asleep under several layers of bedclothes, but the air was chill.

Aoi's room, made available to her by moving several of the ladies in together, was just down the hall from the princess's apartment. She was awakened late in the night by excited voices in the hall and a scream, "Fire! Fire!" There was a strong smell of smoke. As she always did at the least threat of fire, O-hana rushed to take

Aoi's precious chests into the garden. Aoi watched from the door as several women ran into the hall and slid open the doors to the princess's rooms. Koma met them inside.

"Go back to bed. It's only the brazier, it flared up, for some reason. I have put it out."

Aoi could see in the darkness that the ladies went past the door to look and that they must have been satisfied. They hurried back down the hall, leaning together and whispering their disapproval of Koma's abrupt manner, and disappeared into their room.

Instead of returning to sleep, Aoi found herself speculating obsessively about the incident. Fire was a familiar hazard, one person's carelessness endangering all. The huge fire of the past autumn might have started here in the prince's house, Aoi had heard, and the whole of the Fourth Ward and part of the Third Ward had burned. It had been windy, and flaming debris had blown from house to house. This morning O-hana had said that one of the cooking fires had been left burning all night, and now, in the space of the same day, a brazier had flamed up and made smoke in the very wing where she slept. Was she in a house of bad management? Of bad luck?

The next day everyone seemed to have forgotten about the smoke because the prince did not come for the koto lesson and the ladies were busy accusing him of coldness and spitefully whispering about the older wife. Aoi began to plan her departure. This kind of women's complaining was tiresome to her, and since Koma's return, she felt that the princess would be secure and well cared for. Aoi had somehow brought her through the possession or whatever it had been that had caused such strange behavior. Now it was time for her to go home. She told O-hana that they would leave in the morning and she wrote letters to her mistress and to the prince. Making excuses, she spent most of the day alone, reading her Chinese scrolls and practising calligraphy. The air was warmer; fresh breezes through her open verandah door made the bamboo screen knock and rattle against the side framing. She felt the peace that spring always brought her. Though she knew it was illogical, she could never help feeling that the cold weather had been something bad which she had escaped, that the warmth of summer allowed her to grow and unfold.

At bedtime Aoi attended the princess for what she thought would be the last time. Influenced all day by the innuendoes of her women, the princess was despondent and listless as they put her to bed.

Koma brought the low table and put on it the worn paper flower, though the incense burner seemed to have disappeared. She asked for the pearl.

"No, don't take it," the princess said.

Koma, glancing at Aoi, insisted. "Our flower will grow too big if we don't . . ." She broke off, but Aoi thought it a strange thing to say. The pearl was in a small padded silk envelope the princess took from her belt and she stroked the rough spot for a few seconds before giving it to Koma. Aoi massaged her legs and her shoulders for a long time before the girl indicated that she was sleepy. As before, O-hana took the lantern, which she would leave in the hall, and Koma took the brazier to her anteroom.

Waking near dawn from violent dreams, Aoi could not for a moment think what was wrong, though she knew some dreadful imaging had entered her sleep. "It's smoke!" she thought and sat bolt upright, eyes still closed as if she must not dilute with the sense of sight what her sense of smell was telling her. Beyond the curtain-stand that screened Aoi's bed, O-hana's feet thumped on the floor, running. Aoi opened her eyes and leaned beyond the curtain.

Turning and spiraling in a solid twist, smoke writhed under the bamboo blind. As Aoi watched the thin strips blackened from flames she could just see through them, and they suddenly came alive with orange light that reached and climbed greedily, crackling as it fed on the dry splits of bamboo. O-hana was there, beating at the blind with a robe she had slipped off, gasping but otherwise silent. Aoi ran to the dressing space and grasped the bowl with last night's washing water in it, getting herself wet as she moved, but with enough left to throw on the blind at the top, so that the rising flames were extinguished from above.

Since Aoi and O-hana had not cried for help and had put out the fire so quickly, it seemed that no one else was aware of it. They listened and heard no voices, either in the hall or in the garden, for which Aoi felt grateful. This was fire in a place where fire should not be, and the chosen place had threatened her. O-hana, raising the charred and disintegrating corner of the blind, showed her ashes of what must have been paper, now blowing away across a sandy path and onto the moss beyond, blots of soot. A small chunk of charcoal that must have been used to start the fire had sunk through the ash and remained on the charred boards.

"This is a serious thing," said Aoi.

"Who could it have been? I didn't hear steps, nothing woke me until I smelled smoke."

"Unh." Aoi was thinking. This threat to her came from someone who wanted her to leave, who didn't know that she intended to go today. The ladies had resented her at first but had seemed to accept her after she helped the princess. And the princess . . . Aoi found that she could not say plainly to herself what feeling the girl had toward her. She had been angry and bitter at first, but then had demanded Aoi's presence and her soothing services. Certainly she concealed her feelings and all her responses to the prince, to his unseen wife, to Koma.

Koma.

A strange, brusque woman. Did she have possessive love for the girl and fear that she would be replaced? It had been on the morning of her return that the kitchen fire had been found burning, it had been her brazier that had smoked, and it was she who took the fire from the princess's room each night.

Aoi, chiding herself for perversity, felt awakened and interested by this problem of who was setting fires, and she talked with O-hana until full light, instructing her in questions she should ask among the servants and trying to concoct a logical explanation for the burned blind. This they failed to do and the guards became infuriated when they found it and could get no accounting for it. Aoi faced them calmly, saying that it had burned and she did not know how. She could see that they left with the conviction that she herself had set fire to the prince's house.

Fortunately Aoi had not yet sent to the prince the letter she had written saying that it was time for her to leave. So, sending another explaining letter to her mistress, she remained in her room—where there now hung a fresh blind across the verandah opening—and continued her late-evening visits to the princess. Among the women there was increased grumbling about her husband, for whom they had revived the old nickname Liftwing.

"Ah, that Liftwing has flown off again," they said. "How can he be seeing someone else when he has our adorable little . . ."

"That is just the trouble, he doesn't seem to think . . ."

"He will come to teach her as if he is only interested in improving her, as if she is not good enough for him as she is. Strictness and correction are all she gets from him."

"It is taking her spirit away, living here. Oh, if her father knew how she is treated!"

"Yes, but we dare not tell him. He is much worse, I hear. He must participate in the services from his bed, they say." The lady was weeping and angry at the same time.

"Let us hope he never knows how this has turned out, this marriage to the prince he thought so much of, this Liftwing. Who is he chasing now, I wonder? They say he is not much in the northern apartment either, these days."

The princess heard some of these whisperings, of course, and though she never acknowledged criticism of her husband, she became more and more silent and still. Toward Aoi, her attitude was polite on the surface but she was physically rejecting, making little jabs with her elbow when Aoi came near, leaning away when she spoke to her. Aoi thought that, because she had once brought her out of her trance, the girl feared her perceptive powers.

The bedtime ritual became more and more elaborate and rigid. Aoi must soothe her face with scented water and then help Koma brush her hair, the strokes counted aloud: twenty-seven for her mother's age when she died, fifty-eight for her father's age now. The table was set beside her pallet and she had a special way of placing the pearl in the red flower—concealing it between her fingers, passing her hands over the flower, making false motions of dropping the pearl, intent, glancing up to be sure Aoi and Koma watched, finally letting it fall into the cup of red paper, and checking the position of the tiny grains on its side. She seemed most pleased if this rough area faced Aoi. Finally the square of old silk would be folded against her cheek and she was ready to sleep.

Koma always tried to hurry her through the bedtime pattern and she communicated less and less with all of them. Sometimes she seemed to Aoi to be passing in and out of reality, her eyes glazing momentarily, then fiercely focused.

Twice more small fires roused the household at night. One was in the main hall where coals from a brazier somehow fell onto the straw mat, which smoldered and burst into flame just at dawn. By that time the servants were up and it was found right away. The smoke from it hung in the damp air all day, however, and made everyone uneasy. The next fire again involved Aoi.

Deep in the night a figure entered Aoi's room from the verandah, pushing aside the blind, stepping lightly on bare feet to a place just inside and against the wall, where the shadow was blackest. The room was not large, but the two beds spread on the floor were well-separated—O-hana's against the sliding panels of the storage wall,

Aoi's behind a curtain of beaten silk that hung from a standing frame in the opposite corner. There was no sound of stirring or wakefulness. After long and careful listening, the figure moved slowly across the open space of polished boards and stopped beside the curtain. The air was fresh with breezes, the thin cloth rippled and swayed.

Opening something in the hand, the figure held a faint glow which cast light upward on the face. The other hand passed above the glow, moving in slow ceremonial gestures, waving a soft, flexible fabric that appeared as light and moving as smoke. Upright in its kneeling posture, the figure was formal and intent, lowering the tip of supple silk nearer and nearer to the light cupped in the hand. All at once the silk burst into flame.

The figure gasped, startled by the power so carefully invoked, and flung its head and shoulders back. The blazing cloth flew outward, landed against Aoi's curtain, and slithered down, spreading fire before it flickered out, consumed, as the curtain blazed.

The figure pushed backward too violently to find its feet, pulled and crawled across the floor, rolled under the blind, and ran into the garden, almost brushing the shoulder of the person watching there, who had seen it all. Fire dropped from the ravaged curtain and smoldered on the covers of the bed, the flames, deprived of their vertical fuel, rising fitfully, eating crimson-edged holes in the pallets. The fire was put out when Aoi ran in from her station in the garden, folded the sleeping pads over on themselves and beat at the curtain with a cushion.

Left behind on the floor was the pierced cover of a small ceramic incense burner.

Aoi now knew who had set the fire and why it had been done. Curiously, it was only to the prince's wife in the northeast corner, whom she had never met, that she felt she should make her explanations. She asked at once to see her, leaving the ruined mess in her room to O-hana's enraged management. The principal wife consented at once to receive her.

She had her curtains set aside and spoke to Aoi face to face. Though the young princess's women had imputed to her arrogance, selfishness, coldness, and spite, Aoi saw a calm, plump woman who looked at her sympathetically as she inquired with genuine concern, "You were not hurt this morning?"

"No, no. Please don't worry about me."

"But I am ashamed that such a dreadful thing should have hap-

pened when you are visiting my house. I hear that you saved the young lady from . . . from . . ."

The story favored by the princess's women was that their mistress had been possessed by the jealous spirit of this elder wife, an interpretation of which she seemed aware. Aoi spoke gently.

"I must speak to you about that and tell you what has been happening. This is a strange situation and a dangerous one, and I feel that perhaps only a woman can really understand it."

She explained her interpretation of the girl's history. "Her mother died when she was young, saying that she would be happy in paradise and that her daughter should not be sad. In the child's mind the idea formed that her mother would go to a serene land on the moon. As a keepsake, she was given a large pearl which she somehow related to the calm, loving spirit of her mother. But she was angry that her mother had left her, she thought there had been a choice and that she had been abandoned for life on the moon. And because she had been told that she must not be sad, she could not express her grief."

"Poor child," the lady said, though without much feeling. "She is still really a child, my husband says." Sensing that she repeated a criticism, she looked distressed, then went on. "And now her father has sent her to a strange house and he himself must soon die, I hear."

"Ah, you understand. I felt sure you would."

The lady raised her fan, hiding a smile, pleased to be complimented. So far she had been only blamed in relation to this girl.

Aoi continued. "We made some inquiries of the servants and found that she has been separated from her father for some years now because, even before this recent retirement to the mountains, he was living a religious and somewhat secluded life here in the city. But if the house of a relative where she was sent to stay were to burn, her father would take her back with him."

"Ah."

"I see that I need not tell you that she has been setting fires as a way of going home."

The lady began to cry. "Our beautiful house! And all those others that burned last fall. People died! You remember how . . ."

"Koma has tried to watch her, but she was injured. I think perhaps she ran back into the house to remove some evidence that the fire had been deliberately set. And afterward, so little able to rest, she collapsed and had to be taken away. That was when the girl

became withdrawn, when she could no longer count on Koma to restrain her. She has an old paper flower that is red, and I think that has come to symbolize her terrible rage. On this flower she keeps her mother's pearl—the calming influence of the cool moon, the safe love of a parent. She seems to have felt that, as long as the pearl was in place, she would not do bad things."

The lady looked bewildered. By making the girl's actions emotionally understandable, Aoi seemed to be tacitly asking for sympathy for her. Yet she had caused so much harm. There was confusion in the lady's face, but also the remembrance that the girl was a royal princess, an ornament by her birth alone in any family.

"And did you explain all this to her?" the lady said.

"Oh, no. I only made myself available to receive her anger. But now . . . since her nurse is back, she sees it as Koma's duty to discipline her, and she is outwitting her in a game she has always played. She is making fires again. Koma has become too exhausted to stay awake at night and she gets past her."

"She wants to go home to her father."

"Yes." Aoi felt that she could not say that the girl needed love, since she was, after all, new wife to the lady's husband. And though it was mostly maternal love that would help her, such care cannot be requested but must come naturally. The lady had children, Aoi knew, and she could only hope that strong and loving instincts would arise. It would be the decision of this lady and her husband whether to keep the girl here and have her watched or to move her to an isolated place with guards. Aoi thought that they would not do that as long as the girl's father was alive, but in either situation, the quality of her life would be for them to decide.

"Poor Koma," the lady was saying. "She has never asked for help. But are you sure who it was? Koma, after all, is very . . ."

"I admit that at first I thought, as perhaps others did, that it was Koma herself who was creeping about at night. My woman and I began to keep watch. She sat in the hall near Koma's room and I did not go to bed but stayed in the garden outside the princess's apartment. I saw who it was who made this last fire, there can be no mistake. It was the princess."

"What loyalty Koma has shown! We will see that she gets some rest." Though this sounded generous, it was obvious that the lady would have preferred to assign blame to the silent woman so marked by disaster and that she did not accept Aoi's explanation happily. "But why were you the one who was threatened?"

"I think the princess resented me because she sensed that I understood her, even though she takes trouble to hide her feelings. And I was a danger because I could possibly reveal her habits of collecting material that would burn easily, wandering at night, stealing live coals, and starting fires."

"Pitiful child," the lady said. Aoi could not tell from her tone what solution to this problem she would propose to her husband.

Before leaving the young prince's house, Aoi went to say goodbye to the girl, finding her in the midst of packing for a visit to her father. He was too ill to move from his mountain but the prince would take her to him. He came bustling in just behind Aoi, glad to have action, to be able to help in a way he understood, to have something practical to do.

"You are leaving, too?" he said to Aoi.

"Ever the heron
Flies from the shallow stream's bend
Where we had thought her
So aptly placed—calm image
Of waiting and wise seeing."

Aoi was surprised to hear such poetry from him and the compliment to her judgment was reassuring. Perhaps she had been unfair in thinking him shallow and frivolous. But then he passed on to his young wife, so small and awkward in her rich clothes, so joyous and fearful of showing it, and he said exactly the wrong thing.

"Well, Koma," trying for heartiness but barely concealing distaste for the gaunt face and white-springing hair, "you will not need to go on this trip. We will let you have a little rest."

The princess turned to him in dismay. Her face loosened into a succession of reactions—anger, distrust, threat of tears, pity for herself, pity for Koma, and finally, royal resolution. Well, Aoi said to herself, it may be after all that she will mature and learn to express herself openly. Storms of temper would surely be easier to deal with than fires set in the night.

"I . . ." The princess put herself first, with dignity and a sort of daring. "I want Koma to come with me."

UNSOLVED

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the Mid-December issue.

When the three musketeers broke into the dungeon beneath the Bastille, they found not one man in an iron mask but five. Which one was the true king of France? By asking the guard some quick questions they learned the fourteen facts I have listed below. Coupled with the knowledge that the true king of France drank only wine, they were able to discover which prisoner to free. Can you do it, too? Hurry up, I hear more guards coming.

- (1) The man in the red mask has a cell with a stone door.
- (2) The man in the green mask wears sandals.
- (3) Tea is drunk in the cell with the oak door.
- (4) The man in the blue mask drinks water.
- (5) The cell with the oak door is to the right (your right) of the cell with the barred door.
- (6) The man who eats chicken wears boots.
- (7) Beef is eaten in the cell with the iron door.
- (8) Beer is drunk in the middle cell.
- (9) The man in the black mask has the first cell on the left.
- (10) The man who eats fish lives next to the man who wears shoes.
- (11) Beef is eaten in the cell next to the man who wears only socks.
- (12) The man who eats pies drinks milk.
- (13) The man in the yellow mask eats grapes.
- (14) The man in the black mask is in the cell next to the one with the paneled door.

See page 96 for the solution to the November puzzle.

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FICTION

Red Beard's Revenge

by Bruce Scates



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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When he had finished his shower and went to open the bathroom door, the doorknob came off in his hand. He was locked inside, ridiculously clutching an unattached doorknob.

Just like in a comedy.

Except . . . With an unpleasantly chill sensation, Edmund Winthrop Wyndham shouted for help. But he didn't really expect an answer. The house was closed up for the summer—he was supposed to be the last to leave. His wife, his two children, the maid, and the cook—all were gone, the household's members each dispersed to different locations. He himself was leaving for the cabin in the mountains to work on his book, with, as usual, peremptory orders not to disturb him; his cabin in which there was no telephone, where there was no contact expected with anyone . . . for two and a half months.

He was alone in the house. He would be alone for . . .

The bathroom was small, narrow, roughly ten feet by six feet. It led off his study and was in the basement of the imposing, white-columned old house. There were no windows. No one on the outside of the house could possibly hear his shouts for help. He had no tools. The door that would not open was

thick, sturdy, with just the kind of old fashioned solid quality and workmanship that he had wanted in a house. None of this paper-thin modern stuff.

Edmund Winthrop Wyndham, age fifty-three, an ordinarily aloof, acerbic man, began to shout for help with increasing shrillness, to pound violently with his fists against the door.

. . . When he heard the faint whisper of sound he was slumped on the floor in his purple bathrobe, unsure of how much time had passed. Twisting his head, he saw a piece of white paper. It had been shoved through the half-inch space beneath the door.

Picking it up, he read a typewritten message: "Dear sTINGY—if you WAnT to get OUT you sInkKeR then SIGN youR NAME to this ChECK. mAKE it LEGEL." It was signed: "RED BEARD."

When he finished reading he saw that one of his bank checks—*blank*—had been pushed under the door. Accompanied by a thin pen.

He saw it all now.

"Milly," he spoke, "this is perfectly childish. Extraordinarily stupid, even for you. You know how I detest practical jokes. Open this door at once!"

Edmund Winthrop Wyndham's thin face with its narrow

mouth and sharp nose ceased to look frightened; his gray eyes that were beginning to slip from the imperious to the querulous glared at the door with confidence. Several seconds passed; he began to tap his foot. "I'm waiting. Do you hear me? Open the door this instant. I'm seriously angry with you, Milly. Hurry up now."

Of course Milly had always been childish—a quality barely tolerable when she was twenty, pretty, and, better yet, wealthy; now that she was less pretty and nearly forty it was thoroughly insupportable. Fortunately she was still wealthy, which was why he had married her in the first place, when she was a sophomore at a women's college, he one of her underpaid professors. Once married, he had promptly retired to devote himself to handling his wife's money on an efficient basis and to writing the masterpiece that he was certain lay hidden within him. They had been married eighteen years; in that time Milly had irresponsibly produced two messy and distracting children, a boy and girl now ten and eight; had become plumper, more nervous; was still good-natured, slightly befuddled, easily intimidated, *nice*. He—he was thinner, drier, more pinched and chilly, and still had not found his masterpiece:

but in another year or two, or certainly not more than three . . .

"Let me out. Hurry up. What's come over you, Milly? Milly? Are you out there, Milly?"

Wyndham had given up ordering and settled into a rather sulky silence, determined not to give her the satisfaction of his pleading, when another note slid under the door.

"STOOpiD," it said, "SIGN thaT CHECK oR DIE, RAT! thiS MEanS YOU STinGY. yoUR lasT CHANCE!" It was signed again: "RED BEARD."

It was ridiculous. So typical of Milly. Were the bad typing, the misspellings, intentional or her customary incompetence? If they were intentional—was it simply a way to taunt him by rubbing his face in the kind of thing he was always criticizing her for? Or was it a silly attempt to make him think it was someone else? But who? Edmund, Jr., or Catherine, their children? Or a neighbor child, perhaps, who had supposedly broken in . . .

But Edmund, Jr., and Catherine had arranged to stay with their friends the Farrells for a week, before going on to camp for the summer. (An unpleasantly expensive camp, but a snobbishly prestigious one, and

he had economized by refusing to give the two any pocket money to waste on candy and soft drinks at the camp store.) Also the children were far too well reared—far too terrified—ever to think of rebelling against Edmund Winthrop Wyndham. Let alone trying to . . .

There was Angie, of course. He had always had far greater success wooing secretaries than his Muse. However, Muses, he was certain, didn't write unpleasant letters afterwards, or make tearful phone calls in the middle of the night, or tiresomely demand money. But he knew for a fact that Angie had gone to the coast to stay with her parents.

No, it was Milly. She hadn't left yesterday for her sister Kelly's after all. Kelly was to be the first sister on her summer itinerary—there were five sisters, with five houses, five sets of brothers-in-law, nieces, and nephews. She had piled the station wagon with luggage, tennis rackets, assorted balls, gifts for the nieces and nephews; she had pulled her mousy blonde hair into a ponytail, put on jeans and a sweatshirt; she had looked surprisingly like and bubbled *exactly like* the happy college girl he had known. That is, known before they were married.

But she hadn't gone to her

sister Kelly's. She had secretly returned.

Why?

The reason was obvious: revenge. She was paying him back for the misery he had made her suffer. For the bullying, for the biting criticisms, the public and private humiliations; for being weaker, for being less intelligent, less educated; for being dominated. Revenge for his secretaries. Revenge for the way he treated the children, which made them actually turn away from *her*, disappointed that she was such an ineffective shield against Edmund Winthrop Wyndham.

Now she had him. *Trapped*. At her mercy. She must be savoring her triumph, silently gloating at him behind that door. The bank check? Simply an additional lash of the whip, a flick at a vulnerable spot.

He had underestimated her: he had always thought of her as mousy, as weak, harmless, *nice*.

Now . . . he almost respected her.

He signed the blank check. He pushed it back under the door. He would concede. But he wouldn't give her the satisfaction of panic. She had won. She had won *this* battle, he corrected himself.

He waited for the door to be opened.

“MILLY! Please!” His voice sounded strange, almost unrecognizable even to himself.

He forced himself to stop calling his wife's name.

He didn't know how much time had passed. Many hours, he was certain.

Three more checks had been pushed under the door.

There had been another message: “STINGY—THAnKS buT NO thanKS yoU RAT. haD ENUFF? SigN theSe oR ELse! RED BEARD.”

They were all blank checks.

And suddenly Wyndham froze, staring at the checks. At the name of the bank on the checks. He hadn't noticed, or it hadn't registered, before. It was *his* bank, his account, not his and Milly's account. It was his own secret account, which he had built up by highly astute and undetectable (he had supposed) transfers from their account—that is, *her* money—to his different bank and different account. Undetectable, that is, by someone as thoroughly stupid and trusting as Milly.

But—*she knew!* Somehow she had found out.

And abruptly the checks' blankness—that ominous empty space across the amount line—seemed to burn into his brain. His hands began to shake.

SHE COULD TAKE EVERY PENNY HE HAD OUT OF THE BANK! The money he had patiently stolen from her for all these years: *his* money. Check by taunting, tormenting blank check. She could *ruin* him!

He would *kill* her!

As he crouched on his knees on the floor in his bathrobe, a duo of fat tears slid down his gaunt cheeks. His throat bubbled with rage, almost choking him.

He wouldn't sign any more checks.

He had signed the three checks.

Days had passed, though he couldn't be certain of how many in the windowless room.

He had water to drink from the faucets.

But there had been no food. His stomach . . .

The door remained closed. His stomach . . .

There had been no sound from the other side of the door. Sometimes he had pressed his ear against the door, silent, listening. Hearing nothing. Was *her* ear pressed against the door, separated by an inch of oak from his, listening for the struggles inside her trap, her cage?

The realization had come that perhaps she intended to kill

him. Not simply to punish him, to take his money, to humiliate him before finally freeing him. But actually to *murder* him. Let him starve to death.

The ironic thing was, she could get away with murdering him. His stupid, unimaginative, emotional, above all *bumbling* wife could commit the perfect crime. The only thing she had ever done competently would be killing him. Because the police would declare it an accident: the absurd, slapstick fate of man-trapped-in-own-bathroom - by - fatal - doorknob and- starves-to-death.

Damn it—if he ever got out of here, he'd never enter a bathroom again in his life!

Starve to death . . .

There was a whisper: another check glided under the door.

He signed it quickly.

He didn't know how long he had been sobbing. Or screaming.

The face he saw in the mirror above the washbasin was unrecognizable: a skull, the skin stretched too tight, as if it might crack; from out of the death's head a pair of bulging, red, half-crazed lumps staring back at him. Some other person was in there in the room, trapped, not Edmund Winthrop Wyndham. Someone else paced the narrow space, pounded on

the door, cursed; lay on the tile floor, dozed; dreamed of *foie gras* and *madeira*; dreamed nightmares.

The unknown individual began to scream again.

First: "I'll get you, I'll punish you, I'll make you sorry you—s-sorry you ever—ever did this to me! You'll be sorry! Just wait till I get out. I'll teach you. You'll be s-sorry! I'll—"

Later: "All right, I admit it, I borrowed the money. Your money. All right: I took it. Stole it. I admit it. I'm a thief. I confess. I AM A THIEF—"

Later: "How can you be so c-cruel? Please, I don't want to d-die. Let me out. Please let me out. I'm on my knees. Please. Forgive me. You can do anything you want, have anything you want. Let me out. The money's yours, all yours. And the children—I won't interfere any more. Please. I beg you. Let me out. Please let me out. Oh please let me out—"

Later: He lay on the floor of the bathroom, on his side, his knees curled up. He had stopped cursing, sobbing, begging, praying: he was staring at the wall, blinking occasionally.

A sound.

After a while he twisted his head slowly, gazed at the door.

It was ajar.

He stared at it glassily for some time, as if having difficulty comprehending what it meant. Then he cautiously uncoiled his body, as if trying not to startle it.

With a little squeak he abruptly scrambled for the door on his hands and knees.

He made it. He escaped. He was free. And lay on the carpet just on the other side of the bathroom doorway, gasping. Whimpering.

Some time later Edmund Winthrop Wyndham's body stiffened on the carpet; slowly he got to his feet. He stood for seconds motionless, his unshaven, tear-tracked face without expression, before beginning to brush with his hands at his bathrobe, at first in a kind of slow motion, then faster and faster. As if trying to wipe away not merely dirt but memory . . .

Edmund Winthrop Wyndham attempted to shoot Mildred Potter Wyndham while she was having red mullet and a very decent Bollinger in a French restaurant in Washington with her sister Kelly. He was unshaven and wearing a purple bathrobe, and his face and eyes looked peculiar—he didn't even appear to notice the vintage. This

was unusual: he was ordinarily quite sarcastic about his wife's choices of wine.

He succeeded in firing one bullet from a .22 caliber pistol, rather wildly; it hit a waiter despite the fact that the latter had spotted Wyndham and was moving with a rapidity unaccustomed for a waiter in a really good French restaurant. The bullet grazed the waiter's forearm; it shattered a bottle of Lafitte Rothschild '55 that he carried on a tray.

A table of wine-tasters was nearby; outraged, they hurled themselves at Wyndham and indignantly wrestled the gun away from him.

When the police arrived and rescued Wyndham, they proceeded to arrest him for attempted murder as well as on several other charges. It appeared he would be spending a substantial number of years in prison.

As Wyndham was being dragged away, shouting about bathrooms and screaming insults and threats, by the police, his sister-in-law applauded; his wife looked befuddled, everlastingly innocent, and younger than she had looked in years.

At almost the same moment: a balding man with bright red Bermuda shorts and wearing a T-shirt announcing *Camp*

Wahootchie—Chief Camper Ray was shaking his head. "First you didn't go and stay with Tommy Farrell and his mom and dad for a week like you told your parents you were going to and instead stayed at home all by yourselves—and now *this*." He cleared his throat. "This, campers, is . . . is *fraud*, I think."

He waved in the air a small stack of bank checks that were filled out, in uncertain handwriting, with "Pay to the order of *Red Beard*."

"And *that*," he continued, pointing a large bandaged finger (he doubled as woodcraft instructor), "that's—" he sought uncertainly for a legal phrase

"—that's . . . that's *disguise*!"

He scowled down at the two children, brother and sister ages ten and eight, the male one wearing a red beard, the female one a cheerily yellow beard.

"What will your father say?"

Chief Camper looked at the checks again. There were five of them in all, all of them—which was the peculiar thing—endorsed by what appeared to be exactly like Mr. Wyndham's legal signature.

The amounts were for 55¢, \$1.10, 78¢, \$2.36, and 82¢.

"Does this mean," demanded Red Beard, "after all the trouble we went to, we can't have the candy from the camp store after all?"

SOLUTION TO THE NOVEMBER "UNSOLVED":

The boy descended first, using the cannonball as a counterpoise. The queen and her daughter then took the cannonball out of the upper basket, and the daughter descended, the boy acting as counterpoise. The cannonball was then allowed to run down alone. When it reached the ground, the daughter got into the basket along with the cannonball, and their joint weight acted as counterpoise while the queen descended. The princess got out and the cannonball was sent down alone. The boy then went down, the cannonball ascending. The daughter removed the cannonball and went down alone, her brother ascending. The latter then put the cannonball in the opposite basket and lowered himself to the ground.

The Olcott Nostrum

by Joseph Hansen



The bare-raftered, plank-walled room, with its pine wardrobe and chest of drawers, rocker, straw-seated Mexican ladderback chair, braided rug, was no different

this sunny morning from any other. Except that now he was not alone in it, not alone as he'd been for the past three years in the pine poster bed with its patchwork quilt.

Linda lay beside him, slight and soft and warm. Her honest beauty, quiet laughter, shining eyes had made life good again for Hack Bohannon. She drowsed now, after gentle loving. He slipped quietly out of bed, and stood gazing down at her, in wonder at his luck in getting her back, and with an ache in his chest for fear she might not stay.

She seemed well and happy most of the time—with him, and with the young chestnut colt, Penny. But though she never said so, he guessed she felt less than easy with Stubbs and Rivera, the men who lived here and worked for him. Also, she kept close to home, putting off reunions with women who had been her friends before she was hospitalized.

Three years ago, she'd been taken hostage by Mexican dope smugglers, beaten, gang-raped, half-drowned, and had after that night retreated into herself and stayed there silent, lost to him and to the world. None of it had been her fault, but she seemed to fear that her one-time friends would blame her, or maybe stand off from her because she'd been in a mental hospital for so long.

These things were clear to him and troubled him, but he figured time would take care of them, if only she grew stronger. But she was so sensitive. A

dozen times a day he saw her flinch at little mishaps, and her eyes brim with tears for hurts to strangers she heard about on the radio or read about in the newspaper. He wanted to protect her, but how did you protect anyone that fragile?

He turned away, picked up his watch from the ladderback chair. The time made him ashamed. There was a lot of work to do in the stables in the mornings. He'd always done his share until Linda had come back. Now, on too many mornings like this one, he slept in. He showered, took fresh underwear and socks from a drawer, put these on, and was kicking into his Levi's when he heard boots in the hallway, knuckles on the door.

"Hack." It was George Stubbs, a long-ago rodeo rider, now in his seventies, without whom Bohannon couldn't manage a day in this place. "I don't like to bother you, but there's a lady here wants to talk to you. Says Belle Hesselstine sent her."

"Thanks, George. Be right there." Bohannon flapped into a fresh blue workshirt. Behind him, Linda stirred and murmured in the bed. Tucking in the shirttails, he turned and grinned at her. She grinned back at him, tossed off the covers, sat on the side of the bed. Stubbs's boots limped away down the hall. Bohannon said

to Linda, "That was nice, wasn't it? Did it give you an appetite?"

She laughed, pushed back her fair hair, stretched, yawned. "With all the food George serves for breakfast, I'd better have an appetite." She stepped to him, put a light kiss on his mouth. "It was much better than nice," she whispered. "It was wonderful."

"I'm glad we agree." Bohannon picked up keys, coins, wallet, cigarettes, a scattering of kitchen matches from the straw chair seat, and put them into pockets. "George says I've got company." He sat on the chair to pull on scuffed boots and watched her move off to the bathroom. He loved to watch her move—she was so light and graceful. He stood, called, "I hope it's not a client," and left the bedroom.

Bohannon, a lean man of forty, six feet tall, with a shock of Indian black hair, operated stables up here in Rodd Canyon back of Madrone on the California central coast. He boarded horses for town folk with no place to keep them, and had horses of his own for people to ride. He taught them to ride, taught their kids. For fourteen years he'd been a deputy sheriff, but that had gone sour for him. He had quit, yet people kept coming to him for help and, unable to refuse, he'd taken

out a private investigator's license. He favored horses over most humans, he liked a quiet life—but no man had things just the way he wanted them.

Stubbs, a vast white apron wrapped around his stocky form, worked at the cookstove that was a very old model of white porcelain panels and nickel plating. He was ruddy-faced, with a fringe of white hair and bright blue eyes under cottony brows. He turned as Hack entered the high-ceilinged kitchen with its massive oak icebox and pine sideboard, to call over the sizzling of bacon, "This here's Miz Genevieve Olcott. All the way from Vermont."

A neat, grayhaired woman sat at the big deal table in the middle of the kitchen, a mug of steaming coffee in front of her. Her tweeds, her small brown hat tilted just enough so as not to look prim, bespoke self-respect and no nonsense. What marred her perfection was an Ace bandage around one wrist, a Band-Aid on her forehead, and a cracked lens in her glasses. "Miss Olcott?" Bohannon gave her a nod, got a mug from a cupboard, filled the mug from the tall blue- and- white-speckled pot on the stove, took it to the table, and sat down. "What can I do for you?"

"I've had some unsettling experiences," she said crisply, "since I arrived in California

yesterday. I've reported them to the local sheriff, but he didn't seem interested."

"And Belle Hesselstine did?" Belle was a lean, brisk old M.D. who had moved to Madrone to retire and instead got busier than ever. Bohannon burned his mouth on his coffee, lit a cigarette with a wooden match, took the smoke in deeply. The first cigarette of the day was always the best. "Well, Belle's got good sense. What unsettling experiences?"

"Oh, it's such a long story." Genevieve Olcott looked around her as if wondering what she was doing here. "I mustn't take up a perfect stranger's time with it." She made to push back her chair.

"You can't leave now, Miss Olcott," Bohannon said. "Mr. Stubbs is a terrible cook, but his feelings will be hurt if you don't stay for breakfast. He'll sulk for days."

Genevieve Olcott smiled, but briefly, absently.

"Whereabouts in Vermont?" Bohannon asked.

"Ash Grove," she said. "I've been a schoolteacher there my whole life. I'm about to retire. And suddenly I received word that Aunt Nettie has died, and I'm her sole heir. The Olcott ranch. Do you know it?"

He knew it. Back yonder. Two thousand acres of sun-burned hills and valleys. Net-

tie's husband and her only child were dead. No Olcott had run the place in thirty years. Old Nettie had continued to live there but it had been operated by tenants. Until the drought of 1976. Then the wells dried up, and the beef herds—white-faced Herefords, black Angus, cream colored charolais—had vanished from the whole region. After that, except for Nettie and a middle-aged couple hired to look after her and keep house, the gaunt Victorian mansion had stood aimless. The cattle business had revived, but not on the Olcott land.

"You going to live in the house?"

Genevieve Olcott smiled slightly. "Back in Ash Grove, when the attorney's letter arrived, I thought I might. A lifetime of New England winters makes a woman dream sometimes of retiring to a land of eternal sunshine." She drew a quick, regretful little breath. "But—I fear I'm too old to make the change. It's so barren and brown all around the ranch. I'm used to forest-covered hills, with rivers winding through. Mr. Bohannon, have you no rivers here?"

He laughed. "Most only run in winter. We call them dry washes. But they're rivers, all right, when the rains come. Drown out the roads in these canyons sometimes."

"I had a different picture of California," she said.

Linda came in, wearing a turtle-neck jersey, a little leather vest, jeans, boots. She worked in the stables with Hack, Stubbs, Rivera. She smiled at the woman at the table, but her eyes were wary. Bohannon introduced the women, and fetched coffee for Linda. As she pulled out a chair and sat down, she frowned. "You've been hurt," she said.

"My shoulder bag was snatched," Genevieve Olcott said.

Linda blinked. "In sleepy little Madrone?"

"On the beach. I've taken a motel room there. And I was told that if I walked out early, I might see the sea otters feeding, sea lions on the rocks, cormorants and pelicans. And I did see them. Then, suddenly, I was pushed hard from behind. I sprawled—"she touched the Band-Aid—"and struck my head on a rock. I must have been unconscious for a moment, then I saw a man scrambling up the bluff with my shoulder bag, jumping into a car, and speeding off." She held up a hand ruefully. "I also sprained a wrist and broke my glasses."

"Did you report this?" Linda asked.

"The motel manager phoned the sheriff for me. Then she bundled me into her own car and drove me to Dr. Hessel-

tine's. When I told the doctor the sheriff hadn't seemed interested in my earlier reports, she insisted I come here."

George Stubbs limped to the table with a platter covered by a napkin, from under which steam wisped. He set the platter in the center of the table, and a small plate holding a slab of butter. Bohannon helped him fetch eating plates loaded with fried potatoes, eggs, Canada bacon. Both men took chairs, and Stubbs uncovered the platter.

"Sourdough biscuits," he said. "Help yourself."

When they'd finished eating, Bohannon rocked back his chair and said, "What were the earlier incidents?"

"Delicious, Mr. Stubbs," Genevieve Olcott said.

Stubbs's already rosy face grew rosier. "Plain old chuck-wagon fare," he said. "But I guess you don't get that much back in Vermont."

"And that's regrettable." She touched her mouth with a napkin, laid the napkin down, turned seriously to Bohannon. "The first concerned the ranch. I'd gone to see Nettie's attorneys as soon as I arrived, and they gave me the keys and suggested I go see the place. I have a rental car. I drove out there." Her smile was bleak. "I can't say I was attracted. It's such a gaunt, gray old house, isn't it?"

"It always looked lonely to me," Linda said. "Deserted, though I knew it wasn't. As if the heart had gone out of it. It needed—oh, children, chickens pecking in the yard, horses, ranch hands, kitchen clatter. It was like a faded old photograph—meaning nothing to anyone any more."

Bohannon heard a tremor in her voice, saw that her eyes were damp. Why? Everything that touched her seemed to bruise her. He wished he knew what to do about that. All he knew was to give her love and kindness—an easy prescription, since it was all he wanted to do. Easy—but enough? Now Genevieve Olcott spoke, and in her gentle eyes was the same puzzled concern as his.

"I felt that way, too," she said, "and of course now it is deserted. The couple who cooked and tended to things stayed on while Aunt Nettie was in the Villa Descanso, the nursing home—she insisted she'd go back. But when she died, the lawyers let them go." She twitched a smile at herself. "When I got out of the car, a tumbleweed blew past. I felt as if I were in a Western movie, in front of that gaunt old house, built on empty land a century ago."

"No tumbleweeds in Vermont?" Stubbs was amazed.

"This was the first I'd ever

seen, except in films. I let myself into the house and walked through, remembering things from Nettie's letters. But generations have come and gone, haven't they? The old remember the far past best—or so I read. And though it's been kept up, the house is much changed. I saw it all, even the attic." She looked grimly at Bohannon. "Shocking. Someone had been there. Trunks were overturned, contents flung about—lovely old clothes, lace curtains, tablecloths, pillowslips. Crates had been broken into—of china, silver, cutlery."

"Oh no," Linda said.

"Sounds like kids," Bohannon said.

"I don't think so." Genevieve Olcott's headshake was firm. "No—someone had searched for something. Hurriedly, but thoroughly. Storage cabinets had been pried open, old papers and photographs scattered. Books had been swept off shelves onto the floor. There was a table with test tubes and retorts, all hung with cobwebs. My cousin Gordon's, I suppose. He was a doctor. The drawers had all been pulled out and dropped. There was nothing in them but dust."

Linda shivered. "Weren't you frightened?"

"I was too angry for that," Genevieve Olcott said. "Outraged. To think that these lovely

old things, so carefully packed away, treasured for so long, had been treated so brutally. I picked up an enormous old hat, white straw and netting, the crown wrapped in egret plumes, surely from before the first war. I stood there dreaming of who might have worn it and when—and I heard a car door slam below.

"I wondered who was coming. One of Nettie's attorneys, I supposed. Who else knew I was there? I went to a dormer window, wiped away a circle of dust with my hand, and peered down. But it wasn't anyone arriving. It was someone leaving. In a little gray car—what do you call them? Hatchbacks? And in a great hurry. The tires spun up a cloud of dust, the engine roared, and the car veered from side to side, as if the driver were in a panic to get away."

Linda was pale. "He'd been in the house with you."

"Wonder how you missed meeting on the stairs." Stubbs rose to collect the empty plates and carry them to the sink. Silver and china rattled, water splashed. "He must have been surprised as you that anybody'd come out there."

"You were looking out a rear window," Bohannon said. "That's why you hadn't seen the car when you arrived."

"True. I—" Genevieve Olcott's mouth dropped open. A thought had surprised her.

"Why, do you know—I believe that was the same car the man drove this morning, the one who stole my purse. A gray hatchback with a thin red stripe."

Bohannon gave her a smile. "Good for you. All right—you reported the vandalism in the ranch attic. Then what?"

"Then the same thing happened to my motel room. Can you imagine it? While I was in San Luis Obispo, attending Nettie's funeral—which was, of course, my real reason for flying all the way out to California."

"Must've been a big funeral," Stubbs called from the sink. "Oldest living inhabitant. There was big, long write-ups in all the papers. Here, L.A., San Francisco."

"She was a wonderful old woman, a living history book. Her handwriting was shaky, of course, but her letters were marvelous. About her days here as a young woman."

"Sheriff didn't care your room had been tossed?"

"It's a common crime," she said. "So they told me."

"That's a fact," Bohannon said, "but I'm not much of a believer in coincidence. It figures the same fellow who rifled the attic searched your room, and then decided this valuable thing he's in such a sweat to lay hands on must be in your purse." He set the empty coffee pot on

the table, took his chair again, lit another cigarette. "What is it, Miss Olcott?"

She shook her head. "I can't imagine."

Bohannon scowled, scratched his head, tilted his chair back again. "He had reason to think it was in the attic. He couldn't find it. You appeared. He figured you knew where it was hidden. That Nettie's lawyers had told you, that it was in Nettie's will."

"But they didn't," she said. "It wasn't."

"Well, we know one thing for sure—" Stubbs used a white-handled brush with green plastic bristles to scrub plates—"it ain't gold bars or anything big and heavy like that. How come he didn't jump Miss Olcott there at the ranch house and take it off her, Hack? How come he high-tailed it out of there like he done?"

"Good question," Bohannon said, and to Genevieve Olcott, "The man who knocked you down on the beach—what did he look like? You said you got a glimpse of him."

"Stocky," she said. "Middle-aged or old. Medium height. But I couldn't see his face. He had one of those knitted ski masks pulled over his head."

"There's your answer," Bohannon told Stubbs. "Man didn't want her to see his face."

"But why?" she cried. "I know

no one here. I've never been farther from Ash Grove than Boston."

"He didn't want to kill you." Bohannon twisted out the cigarette in the old square glass ashtray that lived on the table. "And he didn't want you able to identify him later." He pushed back his chair. "Excuse me, please." He went to the sideboard and picked up the phone. The number he dialed got him the sheriff's station. T. Hodges answered, the young woman deputy he'd kept chaste company with during the last months of Linda's illness. "Did they find Genevieve Olcott's handbag yet?" he asked.

"In a dumpster in San Luis," T. Hodges said. She was subdued these days when she talked to him. But she still did talk to him, and he was grateful for that. He liked her and didn't want to lose her friendship. He asked for the exact location of the dumpster, and she gave it to him. "Hack, how is Linda? How's she doing?"

"Fine." He wished he was as sure of that as he made it sound. "I'll tell her you said hello." He threw Linda a smile, and saw an anxious look on Genevieve Olcott's strict, kindly face. "Everything all right with the purse? Nothing missing?" Bohannon asked. T. Hodges said there was no cash in the wallet. Bohannon repeated this to the

schoolteacher. She waved a dismissive hand.

"There was no cash," she said, "only credit cards and traveler's checks. Oh!" She paled, half rose, reached out. "And my airline ticket. Is my airline ticket there?"

Bohannon asked, and gave her a grin and a nod. He told T. Hodges, "I think she wants to get back to Vermont."

"I don't blame her," T. Hodges said, "after all that's happened to her. We've been trying to locate her. She's at your place, is she?"

"Stuffed with Stubbs's biscuits," Bohannon said. "They'll charge her for extra weight on that flight." At the sink, Stubbs clattered plates, snorted, growled. Bohannon thanked T. Hodges and hung up the phone. He crossed the broad planks of the kitchen floor to a row of brass hooks by the open door. He took down his sweat-stained Stetson and put it on. "All right, Miss Olcott," he said. "I'll go see what I can find out."

San Luis Obispo is hemmed in by hills. You can see down any of its straight streets from one end to the other. It has a college, bookstores, and music shops, and trees grow along some of its business streets. One of those rivers Genevieve Olcott wondered about runs

through it. It's a pleasant town, but fourteen miles from the ocean, it can get hot in summer. This was one of those days. His shirt was sticking to his back when he braked his rickety pickup truck in an alley beside a long, white-walled warehouse near the corner T. Hodges had named for him. The dumpster was dented and scarred. He got down from the truck, raised the dumpster's lid, and took a look inside.

A muscular high school age boy in torn-off jeans, no shirt, high-top workshoes, peered down at him from a loading dock doorway. Behind him in vast dimness men moved and a forklift truck hauled crates. The kid was blond, with a flat top haircut and squinty eyes. He said, "The cops already come and took it."

"I know. Who threw it in? Did you see?"

"I'd have told the cops, wouldn't I?" the kid said.

"Maybe not, if you went through it yourself."

The kid stuck out his jaw. "I didn't. Why would I?"

"To see if the thief overlooked anything."

The kid's face reddened. "I'm not like that."

"Pity," Bohannon said. "There was five hundred dollars in the wallet."

"There was not," the kid said. "Just traveler's checks and

cred—" His voice choked. He paled. "Oh, hell," he said, and turned to run. Bohannon grabbed his ankles, and he fell down. "I didn't take nothing," he whined.

"But you did see somebody throw it in the dumpster."

"I only heard it land, and seen a car driving off." The kid tugged. "Let me go."

Bohannon hung on. "Describe the car."

"Honda Civic, gray, red pin-stripe."

"Right," Bohannon said. "And the driver?"

"An old guy, grayhaired. I didn't get a good look."

Bohannon let go of the kid's ankles. He scrambled up and made to kick Bohannon in the head. Bohannon stepped back out of range. "This here's a loading dock, and these are business hours," the kid said. "Get your stinking pickup out of the way. There's a semi coming."

There was, rumbling, big as a house, silver siding glaring in the sun. Bohannon got his pickup out of there.

He went looking for the gray car. He rattled across the railroad tracks. He passed the old mission, its chalky walls almost concealed in cool, shadowy trees and shrubs and flowering vines. Straw-hatted tourists with cameras hung

around their necks lined up outside the high wooden gates and read through sunglasses the gold lettering on a black signboard that told the mission's story. He drove on, up this side street, down that, crossing and recrossing the tracks. He came out at the railroad station then doubled back, taking east-west streets this time, glancing from side to side, moving slowly so as not to miss anything.

It stood on a patch of blacktop next to low, modern, sand-colored stucco buildings behind landscaping. A signboard tagged the place as VILLA DESCANSO. He frowned, pulled the pickup to the curb, sat with the engine running. Wasn't Villa Descanso the name of the rest home where old Nettie Olcott spent her last days and died? Yes. He'd read it in the papers, and Genevieve Olcott had spoken the name this morning.

He backed the truck up, shuddering as it always did in reverse, clanked the gearshift, and clattered into the grounds. An ambulance stood in the parking area, too, rear door open. Had it brought someone, or was it there to fetch someone away? There was a van with VILLA DESCANSO lettered on its side. There were miscellaneous passenger cars. And there was the Honda Civic hatchback. The slot next to it was marked with

a doctor's name, but he parked in it anyway, got out, and walked around the little gray car. It was washed and waxed and the glass of its windows sparkled. He bent, shielded his eyes with his hands, peered inside. The red bucket seats, dash, upholstery were as immaculate as the outside. He straightened and read the slot marker. R. DAHLTHORP.

He walked back and found the front entrance and pushed through glass doors into cool air that smelled of room freshener and vitamin B. He heard voices down hallways. Someone coughed and coughed. There was a thin strain of music from a radio. There were television sounds—hoofbeats, cracking six-shooters. A desk stood in front of him, fresh jonquils in a vase, a broad white telephone with many buttons, winking and purring softly, but nobody in the desk chair. He touched the yellow and white flowers. Artificial.

A youngish couple, the man already bald, the woman too plump, led a curly-headed toddler by the hand down the hallway and past him, headed for the doors. "Gamma," the toddler piped, and tried to look back. "Bye-bye, Gamma." The man pushed the glass door open, and the woman dragged the toddler outdoors. From far away down the hall, a high, cracked

voice wavered, "Bye-bye, Stevie." Bohannon saw a door marked PRIVATE behind the desk, and went through it. On his right a door stood open. REVA DAHLTHORP was incised in brown veneered plastic, DIRECTOR. Inside, a stout woman with short gray hair, a mannish blouse, sat at a desk and talked into a telephone. More artificial flowers stood on the desk, in handsome pottery vases. He took off his Stetson and stepped inside. The woman blinked at him, said something into the phone, and hung up the receiver. She started to speak.

"It's about Nettie Olcott," Bohannon said. He told Reva Dahlthorp what had happened to Genevieve, and the stout gray woman looked shocked. Bohannon said, "Miss Olcott doesn't know what this person is after. You dared for the old lady here for a year, and I thought maybe you could offer some suggestions. Something she said? Genevieve says her aunt liked to reminisce about old times."

Reva Dahlthorp smiled. "Indeed she did. I looked after her personally, you understand. It was hard to see how she could go on talking, but it never tired her, and it was fascinating. Her body was withering away, but her mind was quick as a girl's, and she remembered, it seemed, everything that had happened

to her in her ninety-nine years."

"Nothing to explain what's been happening to Genevieve?"

"Nothing I can recall. It was mostly about times very long ago, persons long dead. Her father-in-law, who built the ranch, her husband who ran it, her wonderful son. Brilliant doctor. Killed with his young wife in a railroad accident. Aged thirty-two." An ironic smile twitched Reva Dahlthorp's mouth. "She hadn't much use for our doctors here, I'm afraid. She kept saying Gordon was the only one who would have kept her from dying. He was a miracle worker, to hear her tell it. Never lost a patient."

"She ever mention his laboratory in the attic?"

Reva Dahlthorp's face closed. "No," she said. "Why?" Bohannon shrugged. "It was the attic that got searched. Somebody thought something valuable was hidden up there. I wondered if it had to do with Gordon's work."

"She never mentioned it." Dahlthorp read her watch.

Bohannon said, "Whoever did it drove a car like yours."

Her head jerked up. She opened her mouth, closed her mouth, took a breath, smiled. "Cars like mine are common, Mr. Bohannon. There must be half a dozen like it in San Luis alone." She got to her feet.

"But not belonging to people close to Nettie Olcott," Bohan-

non said. "Or can you correct me on that?"

"The rest of the staff here, nurses, orderlies, therapists, work regular hours," she said. "Punch in and punch out. There are records of their comings and goings. There are none of mine. I arrive at about five or five thirty every morning, and am ordinarily here until nine or ten o'clock at night. You are going to have to take my word for that, Mr. Bohannon. It's all I can offer." She came from behind the desk, marched to the door, opened it, and held it. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

Bohannon shrugged. "Thanks for your help." He gave her a thin smile, walked to the door, paused. "You don't know of anyone else who drives a car like yours? Somebody, say, who came here to visit Nettie Olcott?"

"In the last few days there have been television people, newspaper and magazine people, all sorts, in and out. It's been very difficult for us to get on with our routine here. A man called Wardour from San Francisco was a particular pest."

"Who did he write for?" Bohannon asked.

"He said he was a freelance journalist. But he was rather shabby, and always smelled of liquor. I couldn't make out precisely what he wanted. But his tape recorder was always at the

ready, and he asked questions of everyone he could corner—even some of our residents, which of course is not permitted. It wasn't until I threatened to telephone the police and have him ejected that he finally left. Most disagreeably, I might say."

"Describe him for me," Bohannon said.

"Stocky, grayhaired, rather red-faced." She drew an impatient breath. "I'm really pressed for time, Mr. Bohannon."

"I'll go." He put on his hat, but he didn't go. "You didn't see the car this Wardour was driving?"

"What?" She stared. "Yes, I did. That's why I mentioned him to you. It was exactly like mine."

"I see." Bohannon nodded, tugged the brim of his hat to her, and walked out of the office grinning.

The grin didn't hold once he was outside in the heat again, rattling up the street in the old pickup. San Francisco was a big place. All he had was a last name, a car model, and what might or might not be the man's profession. It wasn't a whole hell of a lot to go on, though he'd managed on less in the past. He creaked the pickup to a halt at a boulevard stop, glanced in the side mirror, and saw down the block behind him

a gray Japanese hatchback. Stopped or moving very slowly. The sun glared on its windshield, so he couldn't make out who was inside. But it wasn't Reva Dahlthorp. The windshield was dirty, and so was the paint.

He drove on, and the car followed. He made pointless turns, the car was always back there. He put on a sudden rattly burst of speed, dodged into a dusty alley, parked behind a collapsing garage, got out of the truck, stood in weeds, and watched the little gray car hurry on past. Then he got back into the truck, and now he was the follower. He did it better than the driver of the car. The driver of the car wandered around for five minutes trying to locate Bohannon, then gave up and headed for home.

Home was on a tree-shaded street of old frame houses. The stocky, grayhaired man who got out of the car did it carefully, and walked as if afraid of hurting himself. He followed a narrow band of cement, climbed the wooden steps of a little stoop, and went in at a side door of a clapboard place painted green but not recently. Bohannon got down from the pickup, made a mental note of the hatchback's license number, then went to the door the driver had used and knocked on it. It opened right away. The man

squinted at him with faded blue eyes. "How the hell did you get here?" he asked.

"I used to be a peace officer," Bohannon said. "I know how to follow people. What did you want with me?"

"Just to find out what you know about the Olcotts," the man said. "See, her lawyers said I wasn't to go near the niece, but she consulted you and I wondered what she told you. I'm trying to write a piece on the family."

"And your name is Wardour," Bohannon said.

"My name is Prettyman," the man said. "Robert Prettyman." He pushed open an old wood-framed screen door. "And you're Hack Bohannon. Come in and have a beer."

The place was one big room, kitchenette in a corner, a sofa bed, a chair that matched, a television set. No pictures on the walls but sheaves of handwritten notes and typescript pages tacked with pushpins. An old round dining room table dominated the room, littered with papers, file folders, manila envelopes, photographs, clip-pings, cassette tapes, a camera, a battered electric typewriter. Prettyman reached into a dingy little refrigerator and brought out cans of beer. He came at his cautious invalid's gait and handed a can to Bohannon. He set his own can down and,

grunting, shifted books and magazines off a dining room chair so Bohannon could rest himself. Prettyman sat at the typewriter.

"Thanks." Bohannon lifted his can to the writer, and gulped down some of the beer. It didn't taste like much, but it was cold and wet and he was grateful for it. "You didn't tell Reva Dahlthorp at the Villa Descanso that your name was Wardour?"

Prettyman shook his head. "I always give my true name. It didn't get me anywhere. She guarded that old woman like a dragon. A mistake. A load of priceless history went into the grave with Nettie Olcott. It was Reva Dahlthorp who got Nettie's lawyers to have a restraining order put on me. I couldn't go near her, or any of the Olcott family." He snorted, set down his beer can, poked among papers on the table and found a pack of cigarettes. "Not that there are many left." He lit a cigarette. "Only Genevieve. And Wardour, of course."

Bohannon squinted. "He's a relative?"

"A by-blow. Gordon's kid by a mistress he kept in San Francisco when he was assistant to old Harry Duncan White there. Big society doctor. Millionaire." Prettyman picked up a thick file folder and dropped it again. "I've been collecting Olcott lore for ten years, Mr. Bohannon.

There's a lot I don't know—but there's a lot I do."

"Sounds like it." Bohannon glanced around the room again. Bookcases overflowed with volumes, the name *California* in a lot of the titles. "You make a living writing on this part of the world, do you?"

"There was a good market in the sixties and early seventies. Magazines specializing in the history of the old West. I made money then. But it was a phase. Maybe the stories got too repetitive after while—how many outlaws' widows' memoirs can you print?" He shrugged, tilted up his beer can at his mouth, drained off the contents. "So I live modestly these days, don't I?" He grinned at the place. "And keep tracking down forgotten fragments of the past, and writing 'em up, mailing 'em out, hoping for the best."

"You said you'd worked on the Olcotts for ten years."

"Ten years ago I sold a piece on them," Prettyman said. "But I kept adding to the file whenever I stumbled on additional material. I'd be looking into this or that corner of history in this neck of the woods, and bits and pieces on the Olcott ranch would turn up, and I'd Xerox them and drop them into the folder. I talked to old Nettie once at the ranch three years ago, and she had a lot to say but nothing I didn't already

know—except details. Then, when I got wind of this Wardour business, I tried to see her again. But she was under Reva Dahlthorp's care by then, and I told you about that." He got up. "Another beer? Good."

"A man answering your description," Bohannon told Prettyman's back, "calling himself Wardour, even driving a car like yours, was all over that nursing home trying to pry information out of anybody he could. This would be Gordon's illegitimate son, is that what you're saying?"

"Could be." Prettyman came back with new beers. He stood blinking thoughtfully into the window light. "He was born about 1935, which would make him fifty-two by now. I never could trace him or I'd have asked him questions. His mother died long before I got interested in the Olcotts."

"Why would he hide?" Bohannon wondered.

"Provisions made by Gordon," Prettyman said. "When he settled money on Celeste Wardour and left San Francisco to return to the family ranch in early 1936. See, Dr. White had left Gordon Olcott not only his practice but half a million dollars when he died. Gordon could have had a rich life there, but for reasons nobody can supply he sold the practice and cleared out."

"Leaving how much to the Wardour woman to keep quiet and stay out of his life?"

"Two hundred fifty thousand." Prettyman sucked beer from his can, went back to sit at the typewriter. "I stumbled on the secret, really. Found out the name of Gordon's attorney from some source I forget now. His offices didn't exist any more. I tried the home address. The files were there, all right, stacked in boxes in the garage. Place was falling apart. The daughter and son-in-law were alcoholics. They let me take the file on Gordon." He snorted. "What the hell was confidentiality to them?"

"They just let you take it?" Bohannon said.

"In exchange for a case of cheap bourbon."

Bohannon swallowed some beer, lit a cigarette, eyed Prettyman. "Two hundred fifty thousand was a lot of money in 1936, plenty to see her through and the boy, too. And all they had to do was keep quiet about him?"

"And never to ask for more. She signed an agreement." Prettyman found an ashtray, put out his cigarette in it, set it on a desk corner where Bohannon could reach it. "She never broke her word, far as I know. Kept her maiden name, lived quietly in San Anselmo, never married, died of cancer.

When? Nineteen fifty-seven? Gordon's lawyer had invested the money for her, and she left the boy, William, well-fixed. But I've checked official records down the years. He kept going into harebrained schemes and losing money. Inventions, gadgets nobody wanted. Then he just sort of disappeared."

"He's here—or was right after Nettie died," Bohannon said. "Poorly dressed and drunk, according to Reva Dahlthorp." Bohannon frowned, drank beer. "I wonder what he wants. If it's the estate, he'd be calling himself Olcott, wouldn't he?"

"His birth certificate doesn't name the father," Prettyman said. "He could take a flier at it in court, but I wouldn't give much for his chances."

"The day before Nettie's funeral," Bohannon said, "somebody tore up the attic of the ranch house. Somebody driving a car like yours. And William Wardour's."

"And Reva Dahlthorp's," Prettyman said.

"Somebody next tossed Genevieve Olcott's motel room, then snatched her purse and drove off in the same car."

Prettyman shrugged. "Not I. I've got a ruptured lumbar disc. I couldn't climb to the top of that house if my life depended on it."

"But you have been following Genevieve Olcott around," Bo-

hannon said. "That's how you knew she came to me."

"Get her to talk to me. There's a book in the Olcotts."

"I'll try," Bohannon said.

"Thanks. Why the attic? What's up there?"

"Trunks of old clothes, barrels of old china, crates of linens. Books, papers, photographs. He went through it all and came up empty."

"Or she did," Prettyman said sourly. "Dahlthorp. I don't trust that woman. What was she afraid Nettie would tell me?"

"Good question," Bohannon said, "and here's another. Why did Gordon sell a fine medical practice to return to the home ranch and set up a laboratory in the attic?"

Prettyman stared. "Beats me," he said.

He jounced into the ranch house yard, and let the dust the tires of the pickup had roused settle before he climbed down. It was quiet out here among the brown, empty hills. The scattered oaks cast long afternoon shadows. He rummaged tools from the grit and straw and dried manure under the seat, slammed the door, walked past the side verandahs of the tall old house to find the power box at the rear. The electric company had sealed it. He used wirecutters to snap the seal and

pushed up the handle, so he could have light inside if he needed it.

Boot-heels noisy on the hollow steps, he climbed to the back porch. The sheriff had paid enough attention to Genevieve Olcott's report to come out and nail the doors up and tack warnings about trespassing to them. Bohannon pried the boards loose with his tire iron, crossed the porch, found the inner door locked, but had a skeleton key that worked on that. A new refrigerator and stove still stood in the gloomy kitchen, but cupboards yawned on emptiness. He crossed a floor of incongruously shiny vinyl tile, found an empty dining room and then the hall with its carved staircase.

The carpet on the stairs was reasonably new, so were the paint and wallpaper. And not all the furniture had been sold or stored in the short days since Nettie's death. Some rooms looked as if they were patiently waiting for their occupants to come home. The attic was as Genevieve Olcott had described it. She was good with words, as schoolteachers of her vintage used to be. But the windows were thick with rain-spotted dust, and he found a very old light switch and clicked it. A forty-watt bulb hanging from a twist of cloth-covered wire responded feebly. The test tubes

and retorts on the laboratory table winked in their corroded metal racks.

Otherwise, the table was bare. Genevieve Olcott had put the drawers back, and he looked into them and found what she had found—dust. He took each drawer out, turned it over, inspected sides and bottom and back. Nothing. He stacked the drawers—there were three—on the floor, knelt, peered into the drawer openings. His heart bumped. He saw a dim white patch at the back of the center space. He reached in to touch it. Dry, crackly paper. His fingers found a loose corner and carefully pulled. The glue that had held it had long dried out. The paper came away. He got to his feet, stepped under the light, read numbers and letters in ink faded to pale brown.

He laid the paper on the table, went down a flight of stairs, and unscrewed a stronger light bulb from a lamp in a bedroom. He replaced the dim attic bulb and in the glare of the new one began a careful look around. Somewhere there was a safe. And in that safe was the prize the attic-searcher, the tosser of Genevieve Olcott's motel room, the snatcher of her purse was after. A quarter hour later cobwebs clung to his face, his fingernails were grimy, sweat stuck his shirt to him, and he'd found no safe.

Hot, throat dry, he stepped to the rear dormer window that showed the clean circle Genevieve Olcott had made on the pane the other day. He pushed the window up for air. Grit crackled under his boots. He crouched and picked some of it up. White. Plaster? Mortar? He leaned out the window to breathe and under his hands the sill was splintery. Screws had been driven into it sometime and removed. At the center. To hold what? A block and tackle? Long ago. Dust filled the screw holes. He turned back and peered around the attic, wondering if he could have overlooked pulley wheels and ropes.

He hadn't. A man who'd take the trouble to remove the hoist beam outside the window after he'd used it wouldn't leave other evidence of his doings around. Bohannon pulled his hat down to his brows, lit a cigarette, stood scowling at nothing. Then at something. Chimneys ran up through the attic. He toured the chimneys, knocking on them, all four sides, with his tire iron. He was remembering the mortar dust. The backs of the chimneys were in shadow. He found an old mirror, wiped it with a shirtsleeve, held it to reflect light where he wanted to see. And he saw mortar newer than the 1860's mortar of the original chimney builder.

He set the mirror down and poked with the tire iron at the newer mortar. He pushed and pried. And a two-foot-square slab of brickwork grated open as if on hinges. Inside was a safe door with a shiny dial in the middle and fancy gilt trim painted on the black enamel. He went to the table for another glance at the paper, then worked the dial and turned the handle and pulled the door open. On one shelf stood little brown paper parcels of dried herbs and powders, marked with chemical symbols and Chinese ideograms. On the shelf below were piled three big brown envelopes.

Each of these was marked *Gordon Olcott, M.D., personal and private*. Bohannon respected that. He found a lace-edged yellowing pillowslip on the floor, dropped the parcels into it, the envelopes, left the safe door open, and the hinged-brick hiding place of the safe. He collected his tire iron, left the safe combination lying on the table, switched off the light, and went back downstairs and outdoors. There he laid the pillow case on the worn steps and nailed shut the back door again. He picked up the pillow case and, as he straightened, caught a wink of light from the ridge of hills to the east.

He stood gazing at the ridge until he saw it again—sunlight

reflected off glass? A car window? He strained to listen in the stillness. A meadowlark sang. Did a car door slam? It was far off. What was over there? He knew this country. Nothing was over there except maybe a service road from the time this was a working ranch. Now a long trail of dust formed over the ridge and traveled along in the wake of a car he couldn't see. Prettyman's, Dahlthorp's, William Wardour's? He'd been watched. As he'd expected.

He pushed the tools back under the seat of the pickup, climbed in, slammed the door, started the engine. He laid the pillow case on the tape-mended seat beside him. Those envelopes were the property of Genevieve Olcott. She must be the one to open them. But he had to admit to himself as he wheeled the rattly truck around the big empty yard, and got it out onto the road again, he was curious as hell to know what was in them.

A young man with a sunburn was behind the counter in the motel office when Bohannon walked in. The kid wore a blousy unbleached muslin shirt big enough for two of him and blousy pants of the same kind of cloth. The shirt was unbuttoned and not tucked into the pants. He

was sunburned on his upper body, too. Too blond ever to get a tan, Bohannon thought. He told the kid what he wanted to know about Genevieve Olcott. The kid said:

"It was my mother that ran out when she heard her yelp. Wasn't me. It was early. I was surfing. But when I got back, she showed me where it happened." He lifted a leaf in the counter, came out, led Bohannon outside. The phone began ringing in the office, but he ignored it and went out on the sand and walked along. Barefoot. "Come on. It's not far," he called above the noise of the surf. "If I'd been here, I could have caught the dude, maybe." Bohannon's cowboy boots made walking in the sand slow going. The kid stopped and looked back. "They find him yet?"

"They found the purse," Bohannon said. "Nothing stolen."

"There's the rock she hit her head on." The boy stuck out an arm. The wind flapped the roomy sleeve of his shirt, blew his long hair around. "And that's where the mugger climbed to the road."

The cutbank was twelve feet high, and almost straight up and down. There were rough places that would serve as handholds, footholds, but not for a man with a bad back. How about for a red-faced, middle-aged drunk? Or a soldierly mid-

dle-aged woman? Bohannon gave his head an unhappy shake, said to the kid, "Thanks very much. Oh, one more thing. Do you have a guest registered, name of William Wardour?"

The kid gazed at the surf. "Wheeler. No Wardour."

"Your phone's ringing," Bohannon said.

The kid shrugged. "We're full up." He moved off to let a foam-edged incoming wave wash over his feet.

"Maybe someone's trying to reach a guest," Bohannon suggested. "Wardour drives a gray Japanese hatchback."

"I check the names of everybody when I come on shift." The kid stepped deeper into the surf. His pants legs got wet. "You learn to memorize them right off. It's a trick of the trade." He looked at Bohannon suddenly. "Hey, that's our phone. I better get that." He ran off toward the motel. "Nice talking to you." He waved without looking back. "Let us know if we can be of any more help."

Bohannon laughed to himself, and crouched to examine the sand around the sharp rock where Miss Olcott had bumped her head. He found nothing. Out maybe two hundred feet a sea lion barked. Squinting against the glare of sun on water, Bohannon saw him on some rocks, a big fellow, yellow-brown, lazily scratching his head

with a clumsy flipper. Bohannon went back to his pickup truck, and drove up into Madrone. He parked on gray tarmac beside the sheriff's station where a tall hedge of old eucalypts rustled in the wind and dropped dry leaves and pods on the roofs of brown county cars. He pushed the pillow case under the seat, got out, and locked the truck. The locks turned stiffly. He couldn't remember how long it had been since he'd felt obliged to use them.

He wanted to talk to Lieutenant Gerard, but Gerard was out enforcing the law. Bohannon got T. Hodges to coax the watch officer into releasing Genevieve Olcott's shoulder bag. Then Bohannon took T. Hodges out for a coffee break in a little eatery with a screened front porch. It was their first real time alone together since Linda had come back. It cheered him up to be sitting across from T. Hodges again. She was uneasy about it at first, but soon she was smiling with her luminous dark eyes. It was her way. She worried that her front teeth stuck out, and unless caught by surprise, she didn't often show them in a smile or a laugh.

Bohannon said, "Linda's afraid her friends won't want her around them now, that they're leery of somebody who's been in a mental hospital."

"Either she's mistaken," T. Hodges said, "or they can't be much in the way of friends, can they?"

"They're all right," Bohannon said. "I know them. She's wrong. But I've given up trying to get her to phone them. It's no use, just upsets her. But she's lonely with only men around the place. Can you drop in now and then? Will you?"

T. Hodges nodded. "If you say so."

"Not if you don't want to," he said.

She looked at him meaningfully for a moment, then turned to gaze off at the pines of Settler's Cove across the highway. "You're clever about your work, Hack, but you can be terribly dense sometimes." She looked at him again. Not unkindly. Gently. But directly. "Did you know that?"

"What have I missed?" he said.

"That I've fallen in love with you," she said. "Ah—Linda's very dear. I like her. I've nothing against Linda. But I know she's everything to you, Hack. And it—it hurts." Tears came into her eyes, her mouth trembled, and she pressed it tight and gave her head an impatient shake, angry at herself for letting her emotions show. She was a deputy sheriff, not some soap-opera weeper. And when he reached for her hand on the

table top, she drew it quickly away.

"I never meant for that to happen," he said. "If it's my fault—" it wasn't his fault: there hadn't been a kiss or even a romantic word between them—"I apologize. I'm sorry. I won't ask again."

"I'll come," she said. "Of course I will."

Stubbs was raking the gravel drive when Bohannon pulled into the stable grounds. The white-railed training ring where little kids learned not to tumble out of the saddle was tidied up, so was the large fenced oval beyond and below it where older youngsters picked up the rudiments of jumping, barrel racing, show riding. Sprinklers watered flower beds. The shadows of the eucalypts were long. Bohannon parked the pickup beside the white and green stable building and went to help young Rivera lay down fresh straw in the stalls, fill water buckets, pour oats into each horse's corner bin.

When he walked into the kitchen half an hour later, Bohannon frowned. "Where's Linda?" Rivera, shedding his shirt, disappeared to shower. Stubbs hobbled from the refrigerator to the table with brown bottles of Anchor beer. A day's hard work told on his rheumat-

ics. He suppressed a groan as he sat down. "She took Miz Olcott on a picnic. Put her on Mousie." Mousie was gentle and trustworthy. Stubbs read a battered wristwatch and glanced at the windows where the light was fading. "Time they was back, isn't it?"

"I'd say so." Bohannon had lit a cigarette. He took a long pull from it, and twisted it out in the ashtray. He tilted up the bottle and washed his dry throat with gulps of beer. He set the bottle down and got to his feet. "I'd best go round them up." He put his hat back on, sat down to pull on his boots.

"Where you been all day?" Stubbs said.

"I found what the thief must have been looking for," Bohannon told him. "In the attic at the Olcott Ranch. Hidden in a walled-up safe." He stood and stamped to settle his feet in the boots. "Belonged to Genevieve's cousin, the doctor."

"Not gold bars, was it?" Stubbs said.

"Not gold bars. Chemicals. And papers. That's all."

"When do we get a look at 'em?" Stubbs asked.

Bohannon went out. "When I bring Genevieve home here."

Linda was a good rider, but Genevieve Olcott was a question mark. How long had it been since the schoolteacher

had been on horseback? Even steady Mousie could lose footing. If there'd been an accident, had Linda been able to handle it? Bohannon frowned and nudged Bearcat's solid sides with his heels. The horse rumbled a deep comment in his throat and picked up his pace. The solid cllop of his hoofs went on and on. Bohannon followed the common trails, pretty certain Linda wouldn't try the steeper narrow byways with the older woman. He made sure to check every picnicking place beside the rocky, almost waterless stream bed. No luck. Darkness was closing in. He winced up at the sky doing its customary color changes from blue to deep green to crimson. Where the hell were they? He drew breath to shout, and there was Linda riding toward him. Before he could rightly make out her features, he knew she'd been riding a long time. He could hear Seashell's heavy breathing.

"Oh, Hack, thank God!" Linda reined up the gray and jumped down. "She's gone, Hack. I can't find her. I found Mousie, but she's spooked, she won't let me catch her. And Genevieve's nowhere, Hack. I've searched and searched, called and called."

He got down and took the trembling Linda in his arms. She clung hard to him and wept. He stroked her back. "It's

all right. We'll find her." Gently he stood Linda away from him, brushed her tears with his fingers, smiled into her frightened face. "Come on. You know tears can't help. Where did you find Mousie?"

She swallowed hard, worked up a wavery smile for him, and told him where and how. They got back on their horses and went to look. They found a sensible, low-heeled brown shoe in brush beside the path. They found Mousie, who had got over her scare by now. Bohannon took her in tow. They rode up the path, calling into the evening stillness, but only echo answered. Bohannon reined up Bearcat. "We have to go back. It'll soon be dark."

"But we can't leave her here," Linda cried.

"I don't think she's here," Bohannon said.

Linda stared. "What do you mean? You mean because she doesn't answer? She could be badly hurt. Unconscious."

"Maybe." Bohannon studied the shoe. "But the brush where we found this wasn't smashed down like it would be if she was thrown. I don't know what I mean. I just don't think she's out here, that's all. It's a feeling."

"It's my fault," Linda said. "I shouldn't have let her go on without me. I was laying out our lunch, and she said she'd

just go on up the trail a little way and come back."

"It's not your fault," Bohannon said. "Come on." He pulled Bearcat's big, dark head around. "If she doesn't turn up, we'll ride back here tomorrow at first light."

It was dark and the stars were out when they reached the stables where ground lights shone on the buildings. Linda looked pale when she slipped down off Seashell's back, looked as if she'd just about run out of energy. "You go on in," Bohannon told her. "I'll unsaddle here, and join you in a minute." She looked at him with eyes filled with anxiety but she turned and obediently made for the ranch house, her feet dragging a little in the gravel.

As Bohannon undid Mousie's girth and hoisted the saddle off her, he saw Stubbs's thick figure charge out of the kitchen doorway. "You back?" he called. "I been getting some bad-news phone calls here."

Linda stumbled on toward the long board walkway where Stubbs stood. Bohannon put the saddle in the tack room and led Mousie into a stall that smelled sweetly of timothy hay. He didn't tend to Seashell and Bearcat right away. He knotted their reins to a post and went at a run to find out what Stubbs was hollering about. His boots

knocked the porch planks. He put an arm around Linda.

"Kidnappers," Stubbs said. "They've got Genevieve. They're holding her till you give them the stuff you picked up at the ranch house today. They seen you, Hack. They know you've got it."

Linda gave a cry. It was a sound he hadn't heard from her lately, and had never wanted to hear from her again. It came from the deepest haunted places of her mind and spirit, where the old horror had dwelt so long. Hands covering her face, she dropped to her knees on the rough planks, then toppled to her side and lay hunched in what doctors like to call a fetal position. He thought it was the wrong word. There was no promise in it. It was a retreat from promise. He knelt by her, touched her, kissed her hair, spoke to her, shook her gently, but even as he did these things, he knew it was no use.

"What's wrong?" Stubbs said. "What's happened to her?"

"Hold the door open." Bohannon gathered her slightness into his arms, carried her through the kitchen and down the hall to the bedroom. He laid her on the bed. He was murmuring to her all the time, gentleness, tenderness. He knelt beside the bed and stroked her, as a mother will stroke a heartbroken child. But she didn't respond. His

heart sank. He knew this Linda all too well. This was a Linda nobody could reach. She was gone again. He sensed Stubbs standing in the doorway and looked. The old man's face was rumped with dismay and self-reproach.

"I'm sorry, Hack. I shouldn't have blurted it out."

"Don't blame yourself." Bohannon pushed wearily to his feet, all hope gone out of him. It had been a long day, and he was tired before this. Now it seemed almost too much to have to keep upright, let alone move to do anything. He snapped on the small lamp on the chest of drawers, though she wouldn't know it. Her darkness was too deep for any light to reach. He stepped out and softly closed the door. "It was the word 'kidnappers,' I guess." He patted Stubbs's shoulder, and walked back to the kitchen. "Phone Atascadero for me, will you? Tell Dr. Manfredi what's happened. Then call Belle Hesseltine. She's nearer, she'll get here first."

While the old man stood at the sideboard, worked the phone, spoke quietly into it, Bohannon went out to unsaddle Bearcat and Seashell and put them in their stalls. Then he got Genevieve Olcott's shoulder bag off the seat of the GM and pulled the pillowslip out from under the seat. He took these things

back into the kitchen, and laid them on the table, where Stubbs had set a bottle of Old Crow and a glass of ice cubes. Bohannon poured himself a drink, but didn't touch it. He got up, went into the sitting room, and took down his Winchester from above the fireplace where Stubbs's rodeo trophies gleamed on the mantelpiece. He looked at the room with its flowered chintz curtains and furniture covers, Linda's choice, and turned sharply away. He stopped at the bedroom and looked in at her. No change. He hadn't thought there would be. Back in the kitchen, he said to Stubbs, "Rivera's back at the seminary, right? Get him down here, will you?"

Stubbs grunted that he would. Bohannon sat at the table and, in the light of the lamp that glowed in its center, emptied the pillow case. "What did you tell the kidnappers?"

"That you wasn't here, didn't know when you would be."

"What did the voice sound like?" Bohannon slipped papers out of the top envelope. They were handwritten, a doctor's records, patient after patient, dates, ailments, tests, treatment. He couldn't make anything of them.

"Don't know if it was a man or a woman," Stubbs said. He peered over Bohannon's shoulder. "That don't look important

enough to kick up all this excitement."

"Belle will know why," Bohannon said.

"I don't know if she's coming," Stubbs said. "I had to leave a message on her doggone answering machine."

Bohannon pushed the records back, opened the second envelope, slipped its contents out. More patients' records. He blinked at them in the lamp-light, but he couldn't focus. "Is Manfredi coming?"

"Fast as he can," Stubbs said. "I'll ring Rivera now." He watched Bohannon drink. "You going to put away straight whisky like that, you better eat."

"I'm not hungry," Bohannon said. He pushed these records back into the second envelope and opened the third. The contents of this one were different. He hadn't had much schooling. But he'd read all his life, every kind of book and magazine. It was a way of finding out enough to make yourself useful in the world. He didn't understand symbols and formulae, but he recognized them when he saw them, and they were what Gordon Olcott had scribbled on this paper. He'd leave that for Belle Hesseltine, too. He put it aside, and here was genuine writing, a stack of pages stapled together, the staple turned to gritty rust with the years.

Stubbs came from the stove into the circle of light at the table and set down a steaming plate of one of his favorite concoctions, turkey hash. He laid a fork beside the plate noisily. "Wake up and eat, Hack." He picked up a large ketchup bottle and made a show of cranking off its top. That roused Bohannon. "No, no. Don't do that to it, for God's sake."

"Well, eat it like it is, then, but eat it."

Bohannon hadn't taken any food since breakfast. He shoveled down the hash hungrily, and his belly was grateful. But his mind was on his reading. If what Gordon Olcott said here was true, then his formula was worth any amount of trouble to lay hands on. It had proved out on patient after patient, with illnesses from diphtheria to encephalitis to cancer. The only thing wrong was the expense. The formula was costly to make up even in tiny batches. Gordon had to work out substitutes for some key ingredients—mostly Chinese imports.

The phone jangled, loud in the stillness. His head jerked up, he slammed out of his chair and was at the sideboard in two long strides. He grabbed the receiver as if to choke the life out of it. "Bohannon. Let me talk to Genevieve Olcott."

"She's all right. Just bring what you found in the chimney

to Schooner Point in half an hour. Come alone and unarmed. We'll turn her over to you then."

Whose voice was it—Reva Dahlthorp's, Robert Prettyman's, William Wardour's? Damned if he could tell. Reva Dahlthorp was trained and conditioned to save life, not take it. Prettyman would have taken those photos from the attic. Wardour's character he had no way of gauging. Two out of three wasn't bad, but it wasn't good either. He lied, "Someone's come in. I'll have to call you back. What's the number?"

"Don't take me for a fool," the voice snapped. "Just do as I say. This is a matter of saving mankind. The life of one little old lady scarcely matters in that equation." And the line went dead.

Bohannon dropped the receiver into place. Where was Stubbs? He found the old man seated in the rocker by the soft light of the lamp, watching over Linda, quiet and motionless on the bed. Bohannon lifted a hand to him, went back to the kitchen for the rifle, then out to the truck. He used the two-way radio there to reach a sheriff's car on patrol and asked Vern, the young deputy he knew, to check out a pay phone along the highway near Schooner Point. He sat waiting in the truck. Rivera found him there.

"What's the matter?" he said. "Is it your wife?"

Bohannon told him the story. Rivera's smooth, brown face looked as if all the world's sorrows had been poured into his ear. "I'll go see if I can help." His shoes crunched away across the gravel. He was wearing a cassock. Bohannon frowned. It wouldn't be long before the kid became a priest. He'd miss him. The radio crackled and a scratchy voice said, "Don't see anybody around that phone, Hack."

"Thanks," Bohannon said. "Just a crank call, I guess." He twisted the key in the ignition and the starter whinnied and the engine clattered into life. He ground the gears into reverse, reached for the handbrake, and headlights swept the pickup. Belle Hesselstine's handsome new bandwagon swung in beside him, stopped, the skinny old woman climbed down. The cool night breeze fluttered her cropped white hair. She pushed at her hair with a bony hand and squinted at him.

"Where you going? Forget you invited me here, did you?"

"No." He switched off the engine, jumped down, took her elbow, walked her briskly toward the ranch house, explaining about Linda on the way. They went straight to the bedroom. The old doctor sat on the edge of the bed, opened her kit,

looked at Stubbs, who got up quickly from the rocker, and at Rivera standing looking worried at the foot of the bed. "You men get out of here," she said. "I'll be along in a minute."

"Something I want your help with," Bohannon said.

In the kitchen, Stubbs rattled at the stove, making coffee. "That old gal scares me. Always makes me feel like a little kid she caught smoking out behind the barn."

"She takes us all that way." Bohannon stood at the table, looked at the whisky bottle, left it alone. He read his watch. Ten minutes had passed since the phone call. He couldn't get to Schooner Point on time now if he had a racing car. He lit a cigarette with shaky hands and paced up and down. Belle would give Linda a shot so she'd sleep instead of lying there in the grip of fear. That was all a GP could do in a case like this. "What?" he asked Rivera.

"I said—" Rivera smiled gently—"she is a saint."

"She sure does a good job of covering it up," Stubbs said.

"All that gruffness hides a very tender heart."

Belle Hesseltine came in from the hall and gave Rivera a sharp look. "Don't talk nonsense." She laid her kit on the sideboard. "Go sit with her." He went, and the old woman came into the circle of light at the ta-

ble. "What kind of help?" she asked Bohannon, and he jumped to show her the papers. She sat down, put on glasses, and pored over them, pushing them this way and that, briskly, impatiently. Stubbs brought mugs to the table. The clunk of his boot heels was the only sound in the silence. Time passed. Bohannon stood behind her chair, peering at the papers. Stubbs brought the coffee pot and filled the mugs and went back to the stove. More time passed. Then Belle Hesseltine pushed the papers away from her with a bark of derision and took off her glasses. "Rubbish," she said. "Ridiculous."

"My bet is Reva Dahlthorp doesn't think so," Bohannon said.

"That bulldog who runs the nursing home?" Belle Hesseltine said. "What would she know? Has she seen these?"

"No, but I judge she wants to pretty badly," Bohannon said. "Or maybe it's not her." He told the story as quickly and simply as he could, bringing in Prettyman and Wardour. "Which ever one it is, they've got Genevieve." He explained that part. "And they're threatening to kill her."

"And that was where you were off to when I arrived?" Belle Hesseltine peered up at him. "Seriously? What for?"

"To save her life."

"Pshaw, they'd never kill her. What would that get them?" She rose a little stiffly from her chair. She was past seventy, and while she wanted to move like a girl, her joints sometimes said no to that. "It's all bluff. Sit tight. You've got the papers. If they want them, they'll have to come get them, won't they? What happened to your common sense?"

"I'm worried about Linda," he said.

She laid a kindly hand on his arm and gave him a rare smile. "Of course you are. And I'm truly sorry." She went to the sideboard for her kit. "You give some more thought to electroshock treatment. It's not the medieval torture it used to be. I think it's the only answer, Hack." She headed for the door. "You want me to wait till Manfredi comes?"

"No need." Bohannon went and pulled the door open for her. She stepped outside, turned back.

"Gordon Olcott was a fool or a knave or both," she said. "Those patients recovered on their own. That formula of his certainly didn't cure them. It's nothing but snake-oil, Hack. He was setting the world up to be made a fool of. Again." She went off along the porch, a stalwart, straight-backed figure, dependable as morning, right as rain. Bohannon called thanks

after her and closed the door.

Carlo Manfredi had come and gone. The mental home he operated, one of the finest in the state according to all the checks Bohannon had made, was over the mountains in Atascadero, an old Victorian mansion with jigsaw work verandahs away from the world in foothills with green lawns and flowerbeds. Now Linda was on her way back there, asleep in the rear of a big old Cadillac ambulance that ran smoothly and quietly through the darkness outside and her own inner darkness. Hack sat at the kitchen table, coffee grown cold in front of him. He stared at nothing. The phone jarred him out of his bleak reverie. He scraped the chair back, pushed to his feet, knocking down the rifle that he'd leaned against the table. He didn't bother to pick it up. He picked up the telephone.

"It's Teresa," T. Hodges said. "You might want to come down here. Vern drove past that phone again that you asked him about. This time a car was parked there."

"A gray Japanese hatchback," Bohannon said.

"Right. And a stout woman was pushing an older woman toward the phone. He thought she had a gun in her hand, and she did. Reva Dahlthorp. We

have her here now."

"Genevieve all right?" Bohannon asked.

"She gave her deposition," T. Hodges said, "and then I drove her to her motel. The poor thing's exhausted. But she wanted me to apologize to you and Linda for all the trouble she's caused."

"Hell, it wasn't her," Bohannon said, "it was Dahlthorp. What's she got to say for herself?"

"Not a word. She phoned her lawyer, and that's that. What's it all about, Hack? Why did she kidnap Genevieve?"

"You mean Genevieve didn't tell you?"

"She doesn't know," T. Hodges said. "For the same reason Dahlthorp turned that attic upside-down, I guess, for the same reason she snatched Genevieve's purse. What was it?"

Bohannon told her. "Old Net-tie must have rattled on to her about her wonderful doctor son's secret cure for all the world's ailments. Dahlthorp looked after her personally in her last days. And she was fierce about keeping anybody else from talking to the old lady."

"Hack," T. Hodges said strictly, "you have to come down here and put all that on record, you know."

"Tomorrow," Bohannon said. "Goodnight."

He hung up the phone and

limped out to tell Stubbs and Rivera, where they'd been on post in the shadows, that the danger was past. Stubbs could go to bed in his room in the stable building, Rivera could get back up to the seminary. Bohannon returned to the kitchen. He got the whisky bottle from the sideboard, a glass from a cupboard, and sat at the table again to drink and brood. He had to numb his mind. His body ached with weariness, but he wouldn't sleep tonight. Not sober. He didn't care what Belle Hesseltine said—he was scared of those damned electro-shock treatments. Manfredi had described them to him fair and square. And Bohannon couldn't see putting Linda through that. And yet he wanted her back as she used to be. He ached for that. He'd ached for it for years now. If only—

A soft step crunched the gravel outside. He squinted at the window. He listened, holding his breath. Nothing. Slowly, slowly, heart thudding, he bent to pick up the Winchester from the floor. And heels banged the porch boards, the screen door squeaked, the wooden door burst open. A man stood there, holding a revolver. A stocky, gray-haired, red-faced man in a rumpled business suit, the knot of his tie crooked.

"Don't pick up the gun," he said. "Don't make trouble for

yourself. I only want what's rightfully mine." He nodded at the stack of big brown envelopes on the table. With surprising quickness he came to the table, placed his foot on the Winchester, picked up the envelopes, tucked them under his arm. He jerked the revolver. "Get up and back away. Hands up. That's right. No, no. Keep on backing. Thank you." He stooped and picked up the Winchester. "All right. I'm going now. But you just stand there for a while." He backed toward the door. Bohannon made to move. The revolver went off. The bullet ploughed into the boards between Bohannon's boots. "Do as I say. I may go straight off. Or I may wait outside to see if you can follow orders. If you can't, I'll shoot you." And he was gone.

Bohannon listened as Wardour's shoes crunched quickly away along the gravel. He went to the door and cautiously put his head out. Out in the far dark the revolver cracked and a bullet sang past Bohannon's head. He drew back inside. A car engine revved to life, tires squealed on tarmac. Bohannon ran along the porch, across the gravel to the truck. In the stable, the horses moved restlessly, nickered. Stubbs in a nightshirt came out of his room. He shouted something, but Bohannon couldn't hear it over

the clatter of the engine. He backed the truck in a rough arc, scattering gravel. He shouted to Stubbs as he passed:

"Look after the horses."

The pickup jounced into the road. He'd forgotten to turn on the headlights, and he damn near collided with a car rushing past the white entry gates of the stable and on down the canyon—a gray hatchback. He switched on his lights and they showed him the license number of the little car. It was Prettyman's. What the hell was going on? He jerked the microphone from its hook under the battered dash and called for help from the sheriff station. His foot was down hard on the gas pedal but this was a narrow, crooked road with steep drops and no guard rails. He put the microphone back quickly. He needed both hands on the shivering wheel. He skidded at a sharp turn, braked hard and stalled. Damn. He got the motor going again, but he'd lost the cars ahead. Then he got a glimpse of headlamps sweeping rocks and scrub, jammed the pickup into gear, raced after them. Too fast. At the next bad bend, the GM skidded off the road and slammed sideways into an oak. He tried to get going again, but the truck only stood with its engine roaring. He knew what was wrong. A broken axle.

He clambered down and was cussing the truck out when sounds came from down the canyon—crunching brush, crumpling, squealing metal, heavy slams, shattering glass. He clawed up the bluff above the oak and looked. In the pitch dark, fire suddenly flared up. He heard the crackling, though he could only see the glow. He slid on his butt down to the pickup, grabbed the fire extinguisher, and ran down the road with it. It seemed a long way. He was staggering and breathing hard when he came up to Prettyman standing beside his car, staring down into a deep ravine where Wardour's car lay burning, wheels in the air. The firelight playing on his face, Prettyman glanced at Bohannon.

"That won't be any use," he said.

"Afraid you're right," Bohannon said.

"Don't worry. Wardour got thrown clear. I saw it, I'm glad you showed up. I couldn't drag him out of there. Not with my bad back. Not alone."

"Where do we look?" Bohannon said.

"Come on." Prettyman started carefully down the slope, his shoes breaking twigs, dislodging rocks. "I began looking for him soon as you left my place. I located him just as he was starting up here. Whoa!" Prettyman's foot slipped, he sat down. "I hope I don't end up in a hospital after this."

"Take it easy," Bohannon said.

They found William Wardour sitting on a rock, clutching what was plainly a broken arm. His suit was torn, his face scraped and bleeding, his hair full of grass and twigs. He stared at the burning car. Bohannon spoke his name, and he looked up miserably. "My father's wonderful formula. He told my mother it was going to end sickness forever. Even cancer. I waited all these years to get my hands on it. Think of the money. Now look."

"Forget it," Bohannon said. "He lied to your mother. It was nothing but kickapoo juice."

And from down the canyon came the wail of sirens.

FICTION

Worse Than Blackmail

by Jeffry Scott



Illustration by Ronald Chironna

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Lord Bradiron, as Lady Bradiron could and occasionally did testify, was not an ideal husband. Molly Camelot, however, was an ideal mistress and he adored her for it.

Now Mrs. Camelot was attractive, understanding, an inventive and unselfish bedmate—but had she not been, Archibald Bradiron wouldn't have wasted time on her. She was loyal and discreet—but that was a given, since he was a public figure and while pompous, vain, in short a standard male, not an utter fool.

Mrs. Camelot's unique, admirable and almost aphrodisiac quality in Lord Bradiron's watery eyes was her uncanny freedom from greed and ambition. She didn't want to make a fortune out of him, nor did she wish to become the next Lady Bradiron.

Hence their arrangement's duration, five serene, habit-forming years. Like many men who cheat on their wives, Lord Bradiron's emotional attention span was as brief as his fidelity was fragile; he might have tired of a great body, a pretty face, but complete absence of threat and hassles, never.

"Marry you?" Molly Camelot had giggled when he mentioned the possibility during Year One, as a test. "But you've got a fine

Lady Bradiron at home, Archie." Similarly, he had to work rather hard to squander money on the lady. Diamonds and indeed costly baubles of any kind gave Mrs. Camelot migraine, or so she asserted. She believed that furs looked far better on the original wearers, and so it went. As a Scarlet Woman luring her keeper to financial ruin, Molly Camelot was a dismal failure.

She worshipped him, Lord Bradiron concluded. Very understandable, he considered, but all the same, the scale of worship was gratifying. Counting his blessings—a smug fellow, Lord Bradiron conducted such audits on a near-daily basis—he congratulated himself that Mrs. Camelot cost little more than the annual subscription to a decent golf club, while representing immeasurably better and more pleasurable exercise. Lord Bradiron's was not the soul of a poet and he understood that romance was a kindly euphemism for thumping lies.

Molly Camelot did not worship him, she merely liked him a lot, in small, well-spaced rations. She knew herself for the sort of woman men want to possess and, as a widow in the prime of life or thereabouts, dreaded her likely fate. Somebody pleasant, with nothing against him, would want to

marry her, and because she was soft-hearted, eventually she would succumb. And that would never do. For Mrs. Camelot relished solitude even though she exulted in male company. In other words she wanted to wake up by herself at least three mornings a week and better still, five.

Being Lord Bradiron's mistress suited her down to the ground. Mrs. Camelot didn't mind being a sex object because she had not the least objection to sex. She wasn't stealing a husband, simply borrowing him a couple of nights out of seven. Threatening a marriage? Rubbish, Molly Camelot snorted to herself—if Archie ever threatened to divorce Lady B. on her account, she'd leave the country. Lady Bradiron, Mrs. Camelot was certain, would not divorce Lord Bradiron for having a mistress. Norah Bradiron's ruling passions, far from carnal, were for bridge, gardening, and watercolor painting. Anything keeping her spouse out of caught-in-the-act mischief and the gossip columns was likely to meet with Norah's unspoken agreement.

Mr. Camelot didn't mind because he was dead.

In theory, then, everybody was happy. A theory fatally tempting to Murphy's Law . . .

“**B**lackmail?” Mrs. Camelot shrieked. “Blackmail,”

Lord Bradiron repeated. He looked, well, strange: at once angry, rueful, and cunning. No, Molly Camelot corrected mentally, it wasn't so much that Archie looked strange, he was giving her a strange look. And a most unpleasant one, for that matter.

Opening his beautiful crocodile briefcase, he tossed a wedge of glossy, eight by ten inch photographs onto the coffee table. They impacted with a sigh and each top corner skidded sideways so that the pictures arranged themselves in an only slightly overlapping fan, like a hand of cards.

Mrs. Camelot donned her reading glasses. “Good gracious,” she said faintly, on first glance. The photographs were rather fuzzy in focus, but not half enough for her peace of mind. They showed a succession of Mrs. Camelots and Lord Bradirons in bed, side by side and sitting up against the pillows. The happy couple wasn't actually *doing* anything; on the other incriminating hand, they hardly needed to be. Lord Bradiron did not keep pajamas at the flat, and his hostess, a disciple of Marilyn Monroe, believed that optimum nightwear was one's favored perfume. Mani-

festly the subjects of the photographs weren't planning to discuss metaphysics or while the small hours away with a joint attack on the *Times* crossword.

"Beastly," Mrs. Camelot cried.

"Try expensive," he advised dryly. "They arrived by registered post at my office this morning. With a charming note saying the sender would be in touch shortly. Sure enough, up pops a call on my private line. Disguised voice, might have been a man or a woman, could have been you." Lord Bradiron's tone creaked from the effort of sounding casual, his fingers twitched.

"He, she, it, or they want a down payment of ten thousand pounds, pronto. I'll be told where to leave that tomorrow. Else they'll send copies to Norah, and that would be the death of her." He checked himself, amending with a hint of regret, "Well, that's melodramatic, I grant you. Her reaction will make *me* wish I was dead. At the best, divorce and a massive scandal. At worst . . . did I ever tell you she's won cups for target shooting?"

Mrs. Camelot did not answer. She was absorbed in the photographs. Lord Bradiron yearned to box her ears. A leech, a wily, hoodwinking drainer of financial blood, was

bad enough. One so vain that she couldn't resist gloating over her own blackmail material took the biscuit . . .

"Oi," he bellowed, less than urbane, "heads up, madam. We have things to discuss. Such as why I shouldn't throttle you."

Reluctantly she abandoned the photographs. "Sorry, darling, I was listening, something about Norah. Look, you shouldn't be too—" But then Mrs. Camelot trailed away, face turning crimson. "Why, you think I'm behind this, you . . . you ugly old brute!"

Brute stung him, but Lord Bradiron found *old* unforgivable. "What in the world gives me that idea?" he gibbered. "I mean, somebody sneaks in and takes close-range photographs, just as if they had a key, as if they knew this flat backwards, as if the whole blasted thing was a setup. I couldn't possibly suspect you, now could I."

"Daft as well as boorish," his mistress responded. "I have money, dearest. Camelot, bless him—incidentally, I have characterized him as a pain but suddenly he seems a prince—carried obscene amounts of life insurance. If you had the intellect of a louse, you would realize that I'm the last person on earth who would blackmail you."

"Nice," Lord Bradiron commented judicially, wagging his

head. "Took me in for years. Maybe you are comfortably off. But I can't help remembering a Texas lady saying a woman can never be too thin or too rich. I look at these photos and I look at you and the impression grows on me that what Texas thought then, South Kensington adopted today."

Mrs. Camelot, shrugging, tapped a coral-pink nail on the glossy prints. "Surely something strikes you about these pictures?"

"Have a care with words like 'strike.' The invitation might be too much for me."

Refusing to be diverted she argued, "Considering their purpose, these pictures aren't very sexy. Curiously *tame*."

Lord Bradiron emitted a weird noise, extremely loud, mingling fury, bafflement, and insanity. Disney veterans might have recognized it as perfect match for some cartoon sequence in which a bad-tempered elephant seats itself on a giant cactus. "Not sexy? They don't need to be, you daft trollop! They're compromising, K-O-M . . . damn and blast, you've got me so upset I can't even spell any more."

"Stop revving your engine, Archie, put your brain into gear. I'll talk you through it. Slowly."

Lord Bradiron had the sensation of being trapped at the bottom of a swimming pool,

sounds distorted, limbs leaden. A red-tinted swimming pool. "Grr," he remarked.

"I am not blackmailing you. Therefore I did not arrange for these pictures to be taken. Before we, er, retire for the evening, I check that the front door is locked, chain on as well. Therefore the photographer couldn't get in here."

Tantrum ebbing to a mere elfin whistle in his ears, a slighter probability of bursting a blood vessel, he sneered, "Therefore these photographs are an optical illusion, they don't exist. I'm crazy, ought to stay well clear of men in white coats with the big net."

"Stop babbling, darling. Though you are right—in a sense, these photographs *don't* exist. They're fakes, you chump."

"Hold very hard," Lord Bradiron pleaded. The confrontation was not proceeding as he'd planned. And his brain hurt. "You and I are lovers. I've been turning up here twice a week or more for years on end, and staying all night. Purpose of visit, as they say on the entry visas: disgraceful behavior."

"Invariably," Molly Camelot agreed.

"All right. The blackmailer knows about us. So why would he fake photographs of a real event, pray?"

"Oh dear," Mrs. Camelot commented, not quite under her breath. Archie, she realized with a pang of regret, might be intelligent or at least effective in business, but he wasn't bright. One way and another, he was emerging in a fresh and unflattering light . . . "Put it another way," she said patiently. "You get a blackmail demand alleging that we're having an affair, without a scrap of supporting evidence. What do you do?"

"Deny it, of course—tell 'em to go to hell."

"Exactly. Your blackmailer knew or suspected about us—I'll cover that in a minute—but it would be very difficult for him to prove it. Unless you've been a complete idiot." Her tone suggested that Mrs. Camelot rated this possibility as an even chance. Lord Bradiron bristled.

She went on smoothly. "We'll assume that you have been the soul of discretion. This block of flats is one of the largest in London, and though I didn't buy it for that reason, my flat might have been designed to protect your cover. It's on the ground floor, at the back, and to reach it one walks along perhaps a hundred yards of corridor, which keeps changing direction sharply. In other words, it would soon be clear that somebody was following you. And if somebody happened to be walking

along the corridor in your vicinity . . ."

She paused, and he said impatiently, "Yes, I wait, pretend to be searching for my key or whatever, until they move on out of sight."

"So," Mrs. Camelot lectured, "nobody should be able to establish that you make repeated calls to *this* flat. The most they could prove was that you arrive at Lynton Hall twice a week, and since the address covers four hundred apartments, the knowledge is next to meaningless."

Lord Bradiron flourished the photographs. "Then how about these?"

Mrs. Camelot sighed and took a sip of water. "They were meant to panic you into paying, Archie. 'Meant,' is hardly the word, they worked, you panicked beautifully. But knowing that it couldn't be me in the picture, I really looked at it. The funny part is that the woman might be me—or anyone. The face is hardly visible in most shots, and when it is shown clearly, your arm happens to be masking half of it.

"Doubles, Archie, lookalikes. They found a good one for you, and settled for a mature blonde with a teensy weight problem, in my case."

"But it was taken in your bedroom, woman."

"No, dear, it was taken in a room—what little one can see of it—with identical wallpaper. And with a carriage clock on the bedside table. A fairly easy prop, I doubt whether Harrods sells more than, oh, a couple of dozen of that type every month."

Lord Bradiron brooded over the photographs. Shaken, he muttered, "Good Lord, I don't believe it is you, Mol'. Unless you've brainwashed me . . . But I could swear the chap is me."

"I am not the blackmailer. Thank you for your polished and graceful apology."

He grinned unhappily. "You might at least give a fellow a drink, Mol'. What was I to think? Put yourself in my place."

Her voice even dryer than the martini she was preparing, Mrs. Camelot remarked, "You didn't think, Archie. The blackmailer counted on that."

She let him down the drink. "Let's return to the topic of complete idiots. You have told somebody about me . . . a lot of somebodies, perhaps."

"How dare you! I'd never do that," Lord Bradiron blustered, convincing her that he had. Her expression was eloquent, Lord Bradiron's cheeks and ears reddened, he glanced away and amended, "Well, I never mentioned your name, naturally. But I may have, ahem, mentioned how lucky I was; it was

a matter of praising a wonderful woman."

Mrs. Camelot's smile could have frozen molten lava. "Most gratifying, Archie. I take it that's your roundabout way of admitting that you've been bragging all over town about your kept woman."

"Take it easy, no need to bite my head off . . . I'm proud of you, it's natural for me to praise you. Once or twice I may have had a drop too much to drink, and been a shade less discreet than advisable."

"Translation, you can't remember how many people you bragged to, nor who they were," Mrs. Camelot said, resignedly. "What a pity. I hoped we might pinpoint the nasty little creep."

She was abstracted, mind tugging away at the problem. The blackmailer hadn't taken those pictures in the flat. But he (or she, remember that disguised voice) had got in to inspect the place. Mrs. Camelot could imagine a way it had been done. The person had followed Lord Bradiron to Lynton Hall. Probably, virtually certainly, they knew him well—and vice versa. So they'd had to be careful to stay well back out of sight. The closest they'd come to a location was a flat on the ground floor.

Then they'd got hold of his key. That was how she would

address the challenge. Copy the key, and keep trying it. Patience and a minimum of cheek was all that they would need. Ring the bell, and if there was no answer, check the key in the lock. People were always—well, several people, several times recently—appearing at her door. One had mistaken his cocktail party invitation to No. 112 for No. 122, another wanted to recruit her to Save the Whales, the third was unaware that the previous tenant had moved.

Yes, they'd found the door the key would open, slipped in and noted the bedroom's decor. Then recreated it, along with herself and Lord Bradiron. Mrs. Camelot studied him, torn between incredulity and irritation. Such a busy chap! Cheating on his wife *and* his mistress. When Lord Bradiron disrobed, his keys were always placed on the bedside table along with his small change.

Certainly there were other means by which his key to the flat could have been borrowed or copied. Equally certainly she sensed that they had not been employed. Lord Bradiron had been unfaithful to her, he had been committing . . . heavens, she couldn't define the offense, adultery was in there for sure, but it applied to Lady Bradiron and not The Other Woman.

Oblivious, Lord Bradiron

chortled, "I'm looking forward to their call now. I'll tell them I know their so-called evidence in black and white is bunkum, bogus. They can—" Paling visibly, he clasped his head.

"Yes," Mrs. Camelot confirmed, "they can still send prints to your wife. Fake or not, she is likely to accept them, and if it comes to a divorce case, the truth of the matter would emerge. As I am sure they'll point out to you when you refuse payment."

"Splendid. All your precious detective work goes for nothing. I'm back where I started."

Molly Camelot said wearily, "Not really, Archie. I see that I must enlighten you. The photographs are useless. Whether they're genuine is irrelevant. Norah knows all about us."

A corner of Lord Bradiron's mind registered that these must be the symptoms of cardiac arrest—he had always wondered . . . Too impatient to dally with glass and cocktail shaker, he grabbed the nearest bottle. What to do now? Emigrate, hide, self-destruct? What the *hell* could he tell Norah? "How long has she known?" he quavered. "How did she find out?"

"Ages," Mrs. Camelot answered, casually. "I told her. Do stop that goldfish impression, Archie, it's tiresome. Norah was

bound to find out eventually, wives always do.

"And I felt that I knew her, you see. From what you told me about her and more significantly, what you left out or fudged over. I was pretty sure she was a nice woman, sensible if tackled the right way, and so it proved. I went to see her, and confirmed that Norah has a problem. You.

"She doesn't want to go to bed with you again as long as she lives. Nor anyone else, so there's no need to glower. What she does want is to continue being Lady Bradiron, sure of security and that mansion in Surrey. We had a heart-to-heart and agreed that Norah needed a husband and I needed a lover. Mutually exclusive, non-competing aims; Norah shared the thought that you're a twit with women and I might keep you out of mischief. At the time, that seemed to make sense . . ."

Momentarily, Lord Bradiron looked shiftily and ready to deny everything. Aha, thought Molly Camelot, so he does have another popsy. Aloud, she finished, "Norah was grateful because she could stop worrying. I felt a lot better about everything on account of that. The vital thing is that the blackmailer has no lever—urge him to tell your wife, it won't do him a bit of good."

Lord Bradiron did not sound grateful. Frowning, he said, "You mean Norah's known from the beginning?"

"Well, the last four and a half years or so."

"Bloody hell fire, *women*." He shook his head in angry amazement. "Talk about two-faced . . . All the excuses I've trotted out to her, and she knew it was eyewash. Every time! And she never turned a hair, nodded away like a good 'un . . . laughing up her sleeve all the time. You too, you let me—"

"Let you what?" Mrs. Camelot struck in. "Refresh my memory, darling. I can't recall your being racked with guilt."

"You know what I mean." Lord Bradiron fell silent for a full two minutes. "They could still send those pictures to the newspapers."

"I doubt it," Mrs. Camelot said. "Hardly any money to be made there, you're not that famous, Archie. And the last few businessmen to be denounced in the gossip columns as rakes seem to have done rather well out of it. Share prices up, chuckles in the boardroom—the public expects tycoons to be randy opportunists, that's what they're for."

Lord Bradiron, lower lip thrusting pettishly, blinked at her. "You're a cold fish."

"Your gratitude's overwhelming, Archie. You came in here breathing fire and slaughter, resigned to being milked dry, and now you can snap your fingers at blackmail and be sure that far from betraying you, I've ensured that you remain fireproof." Mrs. Camelot crossed her elegant legs the other way, tugged her skirt over her knees and added, as if to herself, "I didn't know you at all. I know Norah better than I do you."

"Leave my wife out of this." Lord Bradiron shrugged into his topcoat. "Um, better be shoving along. I'll give you a ring in a day or two. Better watch our step until this thing's settled and the coast is clear. Crazy to call their bluff and then give them a second chance to catch us out."

Mrs. Camelot, voice never creamier, said, "Let's make very sure they do not, Archie. Don't ring me at all. You might as well throw your doorkey away, because I'll be changing the lock."

Belinda Flannery, very cute and sexy with it, was Lord Bradiron's PA.

Four months after Molly Camelot changed the lock, Belinda had moved out of her bed-sit in Earls Court and up into a service flat near Marble Arch.

Not that she spent all her time there. Ms. Flannery, despite her baby face and youthfully taut haunches, was rather older than she seemed. Old enough, for instance, to have a husband who stayed in the background, not to mention a dim little house in a dimmer street, the far, blue-collar side of the city.

One night she let herself in there, sniffed hard, and complained, "Gawd, Ted, not fish and chips *again*—" before flouncing through to the living room and breaking off with a gasp. Quick on her feet, Belinda put on her posher accent and said, "Ooh, sorry, didn't know you had company. How's my favorite brother? Introduce me, Teddy dear."

Edward McGuirk said sullenly, "Drop it, Bee, she knows we're married. Knows the lot." Thin, grey, dim as the house and the street, he was a picture of defeat and dejection.

"Indeed I do," said Mrs. Camelot. "By borrowing your approach, Belinda. First I followed Archie, which led me to you. Then I followed you, which produced Ted."

Belinda Flannery-McGuirk turned on her husband. "What have you been telling her?"

Mr. McGuirk drew himself up. "She's been telling me," he said bitterly. "Shut yer mouth

and give yer ears a chance, gel."

"Excellent advice." Mrs. Camelot gestured to the sofa. "Sit down, Belinda, while I explain how things are going to be. Firstly, don't even contemplate denying that you and your husband attempted to blackmail your employer. I have your signature on an order form for one roll of wallpaper identical to mine. The management company at Lynton Hall will testify that Mr. McGuirk worked there for two months, then left without giving notice. There aren't many model agencies specializing in supplying lookalikes and the second one I tried remembered your hiring a middle-aged, balding man with a hawk nose and eyebrows meeting in the middle, and a blonde woman.

"The models remember you and Ted—he was taking the pictures, naturally—even better. They were dubious over posing topless in bed, however innocuously, but you convinced them it was just for a book cover."

Belinda, eyes dark with intense thought, jeered, "So? Archie will never go to the police, he's got too much to lose." Her husband perked up at the claim.

"True," Mrs. Camelot conceded composedly. "But he won't be going to the police, my dear. You and your husband gained

illegal entry to my home and then you attempted to blackmail me. Or so I shall assure the C.I.D. Incidentally, I'm the widow of a detective inspector, I *think* I should get a respectful and even eager hearing, a lot of cooperation."

Mr. McGuirk perked down, chin sunk on chest, shoulders drooping. Belinda spoke flatly. "I don't get it. You're supposed to be a plaster saint, you are. I'd listen in on Archie's line, he was always gassing away to his mates about this super woman who hadn't got a nasty bone in her body, not mercenary and that."

Intercepting a puzzled glance from her husband, she exploded, "Can't you see? She's going to put the black on *us*."

"Exchange," Mrs. Camelot asserted, "is no robbery, according to the proverb. You tried it on me, indirectly, and failed. Turn and turn about is only fair. Regard it as a fine, a fine of one hundred pounds a week, in lieu of prison."

Belinda's face, contorting, became anything but babyish. "Cow!" she screeched.

"One hundred and twenty pounds a week."

"Get stuffed, greedy bitch, I'll—"

"One hundred and forty pounds a week. Keep talking."

Belinda's mouth closed with

a little wet popping sound. She gulped, "I haven't got that kind of money."

"Modesty becomes you." Mrs. Camelot patted her hand and went on, "But you'll discover resources. That diamond ring Archie's given you represents a couple of months' fines alone."

Getting into the spirit of the thing, Mr. McGuirk said eagerly, "Yeah, and you don't need a car, not in London. The motor he gave you for your birthday, it'll fetch five thousand notes, easy. Tell him it's in dock, if he asks."

Belinda treated her husband to a corrosive look. "Thanks, Ted, real tower of strength you are. All that new camera gear you've been buying can be hocked, come to that."

Mrs. Camelot nearly felt sorry for them but nearly doesn't count. They merited punitive

action and it was no good appealing to such people to repent and reform. No, you kicked them right in the wallet.

She wished she could inform them that they were not being punished for blackmail but for theft. They would not have understood, and in any case, her personal life was none of their business.

Belinda and Ted had robbed her. The stolen property could not be recovered. She'd been the mistress of an amiable buffoon and by trying to blackmail him, they'd disclosed Lord Brändiron as a mean-spirited, fairly stupid character. They had robbed her of a lover and a fond illusion; that had to be paid for.

Now Mr. and Mrs. McGuirk were speared on the sharp end of a paradox. Precisely because she was soft-hearted, Molly Camelot could be hard as nails.

(Continued from page 3)

cious, beautiful, wild cascade dropping onto black stones in a pool, with the mist swirling around them and more cascades thundering down from above. We took a sodden path through the mist, wet black bluffs rising around us, to a trail that led steeply upwards through the woods until it emerged near the top where the water seems to pour out of the

mountain itself and crashes through small tunnels of rock in boiling waves as it drops down its several cliffs. The young couple climbed with us, a little before or behind, and smilingly disappeared over the crest.

A scary place, the Reichenbach. And if a boy had come running with a message from the hotel below, we wouldn't have believed a word he said.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Mine

by L. T. C. Rolt

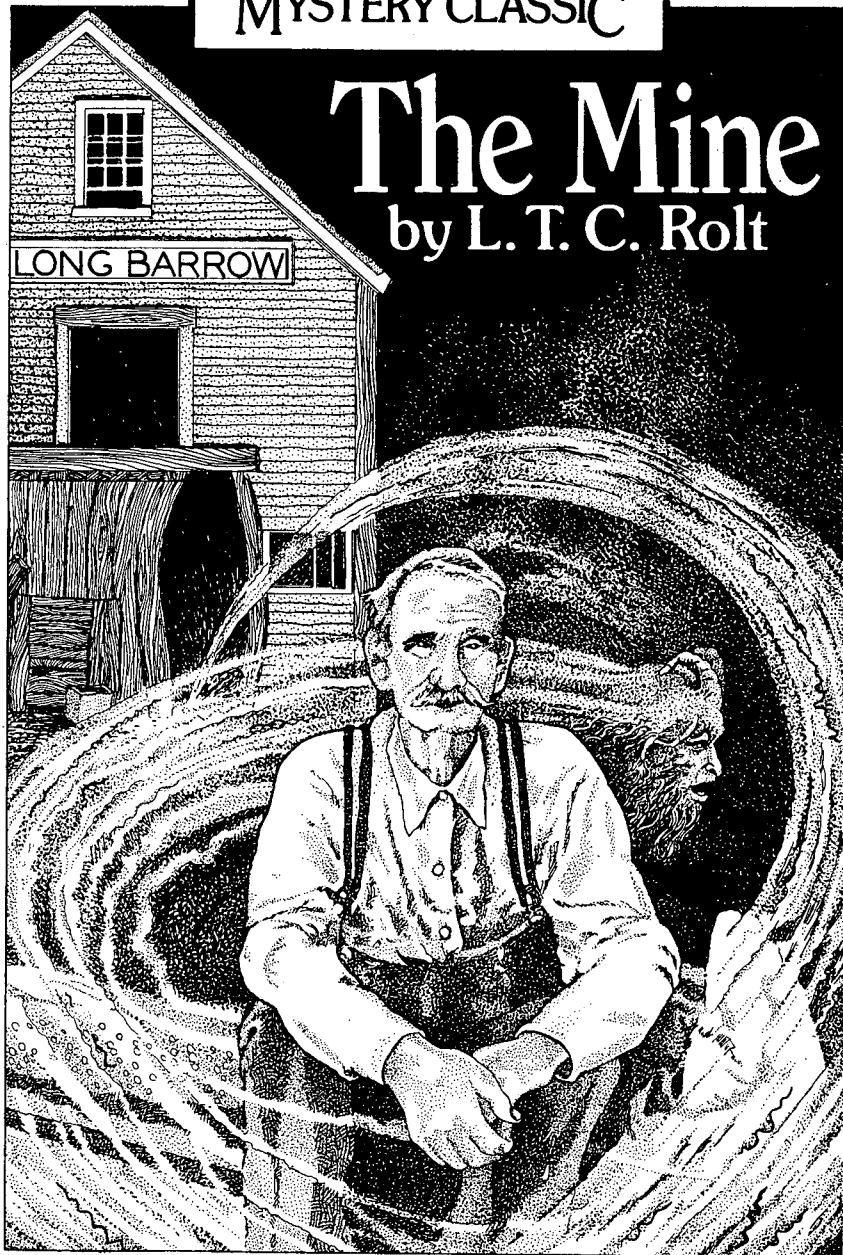


Illustration by Kurt Wallace

There was a high west wind over the Shropshire March—a boisterous, buffeting wind that swept down the slopes of the Long Mynd and over the Vale of Severn to send November leaves whirling through the darkness from the mane of Wenlock Edge. It cried about the walls of the Miner's Arms at Cliedden, hurling sudden scuds of rain to rattle like flung gravel against the windowpanes. It was a night to make men glad of the warmth and cheer of the fireside.

"Why is it called Hell's Mouth? Ah, now that's a long story, that is."

With a natural sense of drama, the old man paused to allow the interest of his audience to quicken. He took a deep and noisy draught from the mug which was mulling on the hob, filled a yellowing clay with fine black shag from a battered tin and lit it with an untidy spill of newspaper which he thrust between the bars of the grate. Then at last, settling himself more comfortably in the chimney corner, he began his tale.

"If you got here afore dark, maybe you noticed the old mines on the hill yonder. Well, they were lead mines, and were working up to—let me see—fifteen years ago; all but the one right on top of the hill, that is, and that's been closed these fifty years. Now, this be the mine you've been on about, though in the old days it were called Long Barrow Mine because there's a great mound up there which they do say was some old burial place when Adam was a boy-chap. I never heard tell of anyone who could say rightly who were buried there, although folks who know about such things have set to a-digging there many a time, but never got much forader. Not that any of them stayed at it very long. It seemed to get on their nerves like, for it be a queer lonely place up there even in daytime, and, though rabbits do swarm on these hills, you'll never see a one there, nor any other natural creature neither. Knowing what I know, I don't blame them for packing up.

"Now, in the old days when my father were a young man there was a horse-tram road—Ginny Rails we call 'em—between the mines and Cliedden Wharf down here in the valley. This wharf was the end of an old arm that used to run to the Shroppie Cut by Fens Moss, but it has been dry now these many years, and you wouldn't see no sign of it today save you knew where to look. About the time I was born the railway came, and soon after that they made a steam tramway up to the mines. They kept the same narrow gauge, only the track were different—better laid, and went a deal farther 'round, to ease the grade. They still used horses then to

draw the trams up the branch roads from the mines ready for the engine to pick up, and this were my first job as a nipper, walking one of these horses up from Halfway Mine to the main road. Then, when I was twenty or thereabouts, I got the job of firing on one of the engines, and proud as punch I was. She'd seem pretty queer to you folks nowadays, but she was a grand little engine in them days, and I used to keep her brass Bristol fashion, and the copper band round her funnel shone like my mother's kettle.

"It was about this time—one Michaelmas—that the trouble started in Long Barrow Mine. I can remember it as plain as if it were yesterday. We had our shed up there then, and we'd just come up with our last load of empties, unhooked, and were running the engine into shed, when the chaps came up off shift. Now, the path from the mine down the hill led past the door of our shed, and I dropped my fire and was having a last look 'round just to see as everything was right for the night as they come walking by. Usually they would be a-chattering, joking and calling to each other, for they were a merry lot, but this night they were quiet like or talking hushed to each other, and this was the first thing that struck me as being a bit queer. So when one of them that was a cousin of mine—Joe Beecher his name was—came walking by, I called out to him to know what they was all acting so glum about. He turned back into the shed and told me what the trouble was. It was fast falling dark by this time, but I can see his face now in the light of my fire, which was still a-glowing between the rails by the door.

"They had struck a new vein just about that time and it seems that Joe and his mate had been working on this new level. Mind you, it wasn't like the mines you know of today, for there was only about fifteen men at the most below ground. Well, at midday they knocked off for a bite of 'Tommy,' and started walking back to the road to join their mates. When they got half of the way, he said, his mate Bill remembered he'd left his teacan behind, and set off back to fetch it while Joe went on and joined the others. They had a laugh about Bill when he was so long finding his can, but when snapping time was nearly up and still no sign of him, Joe said he got a bit worried, and set off down the level to see what had happened to him. He got to the end, and then he said he came over horrid queer because Bill wasn't there at all, so that he felt scared of the dark and the hush there, and hollered out for the others to come down. So they came and looked, too, and sure enough there was nothing to be seen of Joe's mate. There'd been no fall to bury

him, and of course there was no other way out of the level. They just stood there for a moment very quiet like, and then set off back to the road again as fast as they could. Joe said something seemed to be telling him that the sooner he cleared out the better for him, and he reckoned the others must have felt that way, too. He finished up by saying something that sounded a bit crazed to me at the time, about the darkness being angry. Anyway, none of them durst set foot in that level for a long while after that."

The old man paused, drained his beer mug, and, sucking the drooping fringe of his mustache, seemed to ruminate sadly over its emptiness.

His mug replenished and his reeking pipe relit, he settled himself once more and resumed his tale.

"Nothing else happened for a twelvemonth or more, except that they had to give up the new level because no one would work there. But there come a time when they'd worked out the veins on the old levels, and it was a matter of opening up the new level again, seeing as it was very rich, or shutting down altogether. Things had quieted down a bit by this, mind, but for all that they had to give the chaps more pay afore they'd agree to go back.

"It must have been a fortnight or more after they'd started on the new level again, that we were up there waiting for a return load of trams, and had gone into the winding-house to have a word with Harry Brymer, who was engine man there in them days. Died ten year ago up at his daughter's at Coppice Holt, he did. It was an old beam winder as was there then, gone for scrap a long time back, though you can still see the engine house plain as can be on top of the hill, while the old chimney be a landmark ten mile away on a clear day.

"Well, Harry was telling us how they'd had nothing but trouble ever since they'd started on the new level—nothing much, mind, but just enough to make the men nervy and talk of an ill luck on the place, although Harry said he reckoned nothing to it for his part.

"It was while we were talking to Harry, leaning over the guard rails round the drum and having a smoke, that the bell wire started to play the monkey. There was no such newfangled notion as electricity in those days, of course, and the signal for winding was a bell as was hung on the wall and rung from the shaft bottom by a wire cable working through pulleys and guides. Well, it was this cable that started a jangling to and fro in the guides just enough to set the bell moving, but not enough to ring it proper. The three

of us stopped our clacking and stood dumbstruck watching this bell moving and the cable jerking. And somehow it felt queer standing there in the half light watching it and waiting for it to make up its mind, like, whether to ring to not. Then all of a sudden it starts ringing like mad, and kept on, too; so Harry started winding while we went to the doorway to look for the cage, for by that time we had a notion as summat was up. When her came there was only one man on her and that was Joe Beecher; I just caught a sight of his face as he come up and I'll never forget the way he looked. He never said nor shouted nothing, nor even saw us, but almost afore the cage stopped he was off and away across the yard, and we could see him running for dear life over the waste mound and along the hillside. And as he ran he kept looking back over his shoulder and then running the harder, for all the world as though Old Nick hisself were after him. Then he got to Dyke Wood, and we lost sight of him because it was that dark under the trees.

"Now this gave Harry and me a pretty turn, I can tell you, but that was nothing to my mate. When we were watching Joe a-running he lets out a yell like a screech owl and then cries out loud, 'Run, run, for Christ's sake!' When we couldn't see Joe no more we turned to look at him and he'd gone down all of a heap on the floor. We reckoned then he must have seen summat as we missed, but it was some hours afore he came round, and a week or more afore he could talk plain. Even then it very near set him off again in the telling. I can tell you that if I'd known then what it was he saw, I'd never have gone down that mine as I did with several others as had been working above ground. Even as it was, it was a bit strange, to say the least, going down in that cage and wondering what we were going to see when we got to the bottom.

"I know that none of us expected what we did find when we had stepped out of the cage and walked off down the new level—just the quiet and the dark—not a sign of a mortal soul. I understood then what poor Joe had meant about the darkness being angry. I'm not an educated man; if I were maybe I could find a better word for the feeling there was down in that mine. It just told me pretty plain that we weren't wanted down there, and the sooner we cleared out the better for us. I reckon the others must have felt the same thing, for we soon set off back to the cage, walking pretty smart for a start and finishing at a run, so that we fell a-jostling back into the cage like so many sheep into a pen, and mighty glad we were to see daylight, I can tell you."

The old man paused, rubbing his hands nervously one over the

other and drawing his chair nearer to the fire as though suddenly chilled.

"We found Joe Beecher in Dyke Wood," he went on, "at the bottom of the old quarry as there is there. We covered up his face quick with a coat. I didn't fear God nor man in them days, but it were too much for me, and it didn't seem right that a mortal face should take that shape.

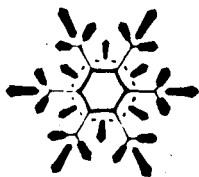
"Meanwhile, of course, my mate was took pretty bad. He'd just lie on his bed come day go day and not a word to anyone, but in the night he'd start shaking all over and crying out something terrible, same as he'd done the first time in the engine house. He nearly drove his old woman crazy, too, but after a time he quieted down until one day he was man enough to tell us what it was he saw.

"Then he said that when the cage came up there was something crouched atop of it, holding on to the cables. He couldn't see it very plain, he said, not half as clear as he could see Joe even in the half light, but it had a human shape, he thought, even if it did seem terrible tall and thin, and it seemed to be a kind of dirty white all over, like summat that's grown up in the dark and never had no light. When the cage stopped, it come down and made after Joe as quick and quiet as a cat after a sparrow. He could hear Joe's running plain enough across the yard, he said, but this thing made never a sound, though it went fast enough and was catching up on him, so that when he got to the edge of the wood it looked as if it was reaching out for him with its arms.

"Well, I can't tell you no more. No one never went down that mine again, and we cut the cage ropes and the guides and covered over the mouth of the shaft with girt great old timbers all bolted fast. A bit foolish, maybe you'll think, but when we heard my mate's tale we fancied, like, that something might come a-crawling up. Any road, that's how it come to be named Hell's Mouth instead of Long Barrow. For myself I reckon hell be too good a name for it. Bible says hell be fire and brimstone, but at any rate fire is something I can understand and I could abide it better than the dark and the quiet down there."



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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



No one argues that war is hell, not when it comes to the real thing. But for the thousands of people who belong to the real-life SCA (Society for Creative Anachronism), the annual Pennsic War is an elaborate game with strict rules of honor, a chivalric code, a rigid hierarchy, medieval dress for combatants—and tons of fun (or should I say, barrels of fun? bales of fun? cauldrons of fun?). At any rate, each summer SCA members are reunited on a large campsite in the Pennsylvania countryside, and the designated battle times leave plenty of leisure for tracking down fellow SCA friends and sharing war stories, campfire cooking, and pints of brew. Mary Monica Pulver, an SCA member herself, offers readers a members-only view in her first novel, **Murder at the War** (St. Martin's, \$16.95, 260 pp.), and it's a thoroughly fascinating picture, one we "mundanes" (the SCA term for non-members) are lucky to witness. A real murder, memorable characters, and a fairly unconventional investigation should make *Murder at the War* irresistible to all mystery fans who are even a bit curious about this unique organization.

The Edgars—the achievement awards given to fellow members by the Mystery Writers of America—are an annual event, and this year's award for "Best First Novel" went to Larry Beinhart's **No One Rides for Free** (Avon, \$3.95, 229 pp.). The hero, Tony, exhibits few heroic qualities as he tries to find out what a once-

prominent business executive is squealing about to the IRS in order to keep himself out of jail. The trail is neither straight nor narrow; Tony gets involved in a hot and hopeless affair and takes a backward dive in his battle with cocaine addiction. Read this one if you're a fan of Elmore Leonard for a tough, un-pretty, exciting P.I. case.

Some excellent writing and an unrelievedly downbeat story line make Domenic Stansberry's **The Spoiler** special, but definitely not everyone's cup of tea (Atlantic Monthly Press, \$14.95, 288 pp.). The protagonist is Frank Lofton, a journeyman reporter, whose life has taken a turn: a routine physical indicates the possibility that he is dying. He walks out of the doctor's office, out of his routine marriage, and into a deadly mess in Holyoke, Massachusetts, a long way from his Colorado home. The background is very minor-league baseball, local politics, racism, and corruption, and it's a heady brew, one brimming with violence and dripping with fatalism. Lofton isn't at all endearing, but he's the most sympathetic character in the novel.

Faye Kellerman was praised in this space for her first novel, *Ritual Bath*, which introduced Rina Lazarus and her two young sons, all three residents of a reclusive orthodox Jewish community in southern California. Called in to investigate that first case was Detective Decker, who formed a close alliance with Rina in order to flush out a murderer. In **Sacred and Profane** (Arbor House, \$16.95, 311 pp.) their relationship has progressed to the point that Decker is seriously studying Judaism, and spending lots of time with Rina and her boys. It's on a camping trip with the kids, in fact, that Decker begins his next case: the boys stumble across the charred skeletal remains of a young woman. This case takes him into some of the seamier spots of the city, where runaway children are turning to prostitution to survive—and not all of them manage it. Decker's love for Rina and the peace he often finds in his religious studies are threatened as his investigation drags him into a web of evil. The characters are richly drawn, the mystery is compelling, and the conflict Decker experiences between his old life and the new ways is heart-clutching.

Another writer whose work has already garnered praise is Mickey Friedman, whose latest—**Venetian Mask** (Scribner's, \$18.95, 308 pp.)—will also be acclaimed. The setting is Venice at carnival time, when an old, decaying city becomes nervously alive with masked revelers determined to recapture the decadence and dissolution of the original eighteenth century fête. A small band

of friends journey from Paris to join the festival. They have agreed to costume themselves as their "true selves," and keep their costumes secret until the appointed time in the designated piazza. When a member of the group is murdered, and the facts plainly point to a member of the band as the killer, the party masks slip to reveal—more masks. This is a fascinating character study, rich in Venetian background, tautly plotted and cunningly devised.

William DeAndrea's Matt Cobb is a well-paid troubleshooter for a major TV network, a bright and winning narrator of his own tales. **Killed with a Passion** has just been published in paperback (Mysterious Press, \$3.50, 213 pp.), and it's a pleasant way to escape for a few hours. Because business is taking him into the area anyway, Matt reluctantly agrees to attend the wedding of Debbie Whitten, the true love of Matt's college buddy, Dan. Matt's reluctance comes from the fact that Debbie is not marrying Dan, who still openly carries a torch for her. Matt never liked Debbie, but it quickly appears that someone else's feelings for the bride were closer to hate—and unless Matt can locate her real killer, Debbie is going to ruin Dan's life from beyond her grave.

Also on a light note is Dover's reprint of **The Taste of Murder** by Joanna Cannan, originally published in 1950 under the title *Poisonous Relations* (\$4.50, 171 pp.). This is one of those wonderful period British mysteries with a big house at the center of the tale, a collection of eccentrics—and a murderer. The protagonist is Bunny d'Estray, widow of a poet and mother of a precocious pre-pubescent daughter, who has recently married an older widower, Sir Charles. His grown children obviously do not approve of Bunny, even when it's her idea and energies that have converted the big house into a small residential hotel (to save it from the taxman's hands). The business is going well, although Bunny is having second thoughts about the wisdom of her dull marriage, when her life livens up considerably: she becomes the prime suspect when a grouchy guest is fatally poisoned. This one has original characters, lively drawing room dialogue, and a plot twist that should please readers who love the traditional country house mystery.

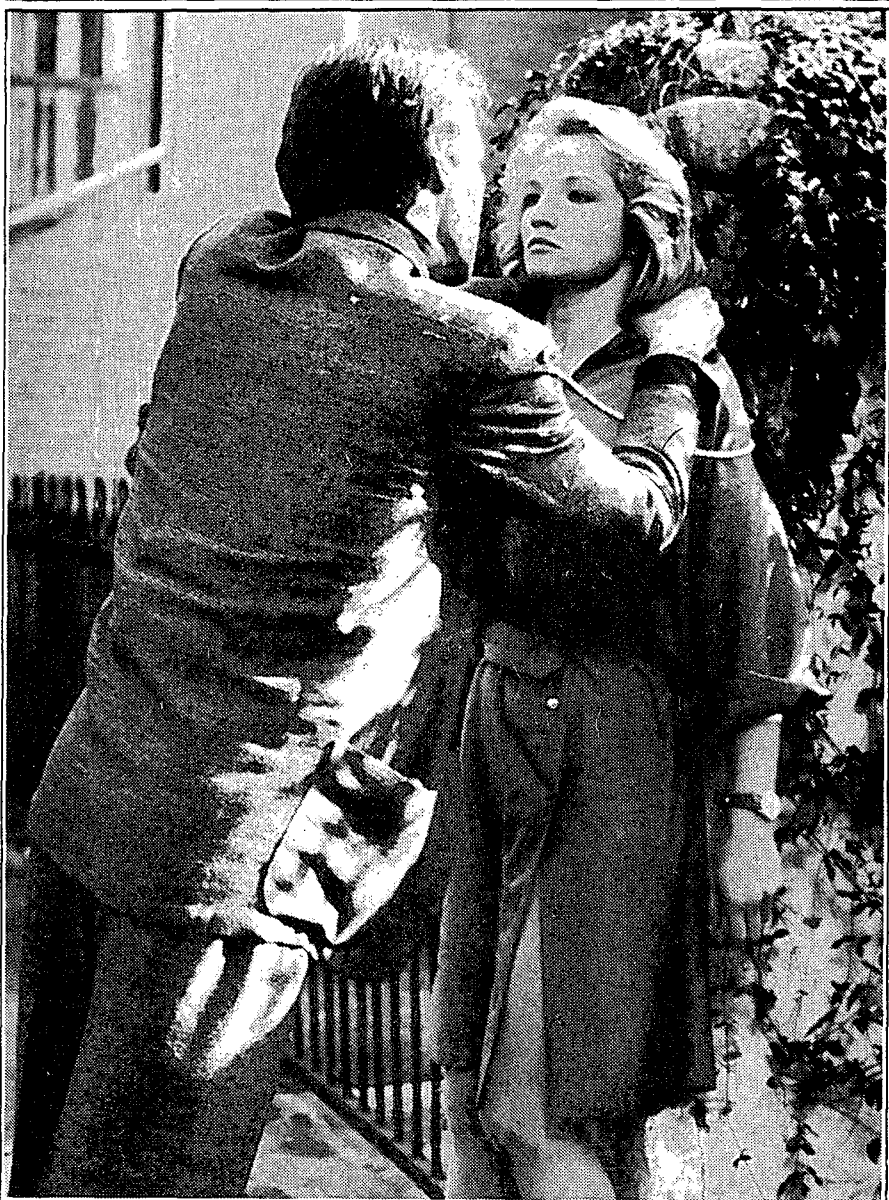
Cast of Killers by Sidney D. Kirkpatrick is a fascinating tale within a tale. Kirkpatrick began research for a biography of King Vidor, the very successful Hollywood director, and found that the famed director had left copious notes, diaries, scripts—but nothing for the entire year of 1967. What had Vidor been working on that year? The answer turned up in a carefully cached box in one of the Vidor estate's garages. King Vidor had

been researching the 1922 shooting of William Desmond Taylor, one of the then-young Hollywood's most dashing and popular directors—a killing that rocked the film community when it occurred, created a scandal that ruined more than one promising movie career, *and was never solved!* Kirkpatrick retraces Vidor's research steps, and reveals not only the probable identity of the killer, but the probable reason King Vidor packed all the evidence away and never told anyone about it. (Penguin, \$4.95, 301 pp.)

Orania Papazoglou has just published **Death's Savage Passion**, her third mystery to feature romance writer Patience McKenna, "girl detective," and it's as funny as the earlier two adventures. There's an added bonus here, too, as Papazoglou gives us a behind-the-scenes peek into the world of "genre publishing"—the "lines" that offer their fans a steady stream of romances, mysteries, westerns, sci fi, etc. The latest wrinkle, it seems, is the demand for "romantic suspense," a hybrid whose very existence maddens the serious romance novelists. So when the newly discovered author of a much-touted romantic suspense manuscript suddenly dies, Pay McKenna is suspicious. Worse still, *she* is under suspicion. Obviously this is a case that calls for Patience, serious writer and commercially successful romance writer, to doff that role and assume the one of grown-up Nancy Drew, albeit a Nancy who chain smokes and smartmouths everyone. Pay McKenna, the quintessential New Yorker, to the rescue! (Penguin, \$3.50, 179 pp.)

Speak Softly by Lawrence Alexander reprises Teddy Roosevelt as New York Police Commissioner and—as in *The Big Stick* published last year—Teddy proves to be a ripping good detective. Alexander writes with high energy and unflagging good spirits, using a solid background; the tale involves Teddy's schoolboy cousin (FDR), the founders of the Mafia, a stolen submarine prototype, a vendetta, and much more—all told at a tearing pace. This is, quite simply, lots of fun. (Doubleday, \$16.95, 250 pp.)

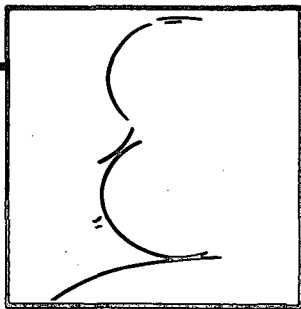
Another historical msyttery is P.C. Doherty's **Satan in St. Mary's**, by the author of the acclaimed *Death of a King*. *Satan* introduces a new series character in the person of Hugh Corbett, a clerk in the court of King Edward I. Doherty's scholarship authentically recreates the life and times of thirteenth-century London, but it is the author's storytelling ability—the keen eye for the bizarre detail, the flair for painting the people and the times—that makes this such compelling reading. (St. Martin's, \$12.95, 186 pp.)



Dennis Quaid and Ellen Barkin in *The Big Easy*.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



As we have recently had more than one occasion to observe, Hollywood movie makers are increasingly taking advantage of the popularity of the mystery genre. Movies that a few years ago would have been made as pure love stories or comedies are now routinely given a mystery or suspense or police plot. **The Big Easy** mixes love between Lieutenant Remy McSwain, a police homicide investigator in New Orleans, played by Dennis Quaid, and a blonde assistant D.A.—Anne Osborne—played by Ellen Barkin. The title is taken from the locals' way of referring to the wide open spirit of New Orleans: folks in "the big easy" don't let themselves get excited about problems like the Mafia, voodoo rites in the black ghetto, or small-potatoes police corruption.

In the interims when the lov-

ers are out of bed, his police work takes McSwain into what looks like a complicated gang war over heroin between the Mafia and the ghetto under-worlds. For her part, Anne Osborne is investigating the police department, which has a "pad" or money collection racket all around town. It's nothing vicious—just a matter of expediting bar owners' licenses and overlooking minor violations—but it is illegal. As a matter of course McSwain, who comes from a family of cops, is in on the take.

McSwain is outraged when Anne credits a street rumor that disguised cops in an unmarked police car could have committed one of the mob rub-outs. There is no connection between petty corruption of the kind he is party to—strictly in the spirit of the big easy—and serious crime. "We're the good

guys," he insists after rescuing Anne from a purse snatcher; "we're all that stands between you and them." Anne seems awfully naive at this moment. But as the plot thickens, McSwain's not having clean hands begins to prevent him from acting as one of the good guys.

Here at "Murder By Direction" we ordinarily find ourselves wary of the police story in which the search for wrongdoers ends up in the police department itself. The trouble is that the point usually isn't to place the solution to the mystery in an unlikely place, as it is surely the responsibility of well-turned plots to do, but rather to preach against police corruption, which we prefer to see handled elsewhere. In *The Big Easy*, though, the viewer's willingness to wink at McSwain's small peculations in the interest of overall law and order, is used to obscure the solution. And the moral relates to the solution as well. For McSwain has to clean up his act if he wants to solve the killings—he has to be an honest guy to be one of the good guys who deal with crime.

The Big Easy devotes too much of its energy to love scenes, to the filming of striking New Orleans locales, and to the authenticity of star Dennis Quaid's Cajun accent (a mixture of New Yorkese and Southern speech,

with a soupçon of French thrown in). But this is a movie that finally qualifies as mystery even though it sets out to exploit the mystery genre.

The movie, *Nadine*, on the other hand, never rises above its exploitation of the thriller genre for the purpose of making a romantic comedy. Jeff Bridges and Kim Basinger look terrific together as a separated husband and wife about to be reunited in marriage through their stumbling into an intrigue. Involved are switched photographs, a 1950's, small-town Texas big land deal, and plenty of hairbreadth escapes for the intrepid couple. Bridges wears a fabulously authentic, 1950's maroon shirt, light jacket, and wide blue and white tie splashed with maroon palm trees. He has some amusing dialogue, too, as he tries to cover up the chronic financial failure of his rundown roadside bar, The Bluebonnet Lounge. "All my money's tied up in, uh, assets," he tells his wife when she asks him for the alimony. "You know, that kind of stuff." But the potentially riveting complications and dangers, which recall the troubles of the couple in Hitchcock's *Young and Innocent* (1937), are played too close to farce and slapstick to qualify as mystery.

THE STORY THAT WON



Arthur Tress

The July Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Debra Taylor Parks of Chester, Virginia. Honorable mentions go to Sharon E. Martin of Cushing, Oklahoma; H. P. Stabitz of Markham, Ontario, Canada; Brian McCullough of Kanata, Ontario, Canada; Russ Parrish of Atlanta, Georgia; Patricia Jura of Greenwich, Connecticut; and Richard F. Dumas of Apalachicola, Florida.

MURDER ON HIS MIND

by Debra Taylor Parks

When we were children Willie and I played a version of Blind Man's Buff. More often than not Willie would say, "Here, Roger, you wear the blindfold, I'm the target." I'd stand in the middle of the room, dependent on Willie's voice and the sound of his movements. Then, when I was sure, I'd throw the tennis ball and hear the thud that told me I'd been on target. But Willie always claimed I missed. He hated being caught. Willie never knew what valuable practice the game provided for when, years later on a hunting trip, the gun he cleaned misfired and left me permanently blindfolded.

I hated him, but I pretended dependence on Willie after the accident. I lived with him, put up with his condescending attitude, listened to his conceit, greedy schemes, and pretentiousness. For three years I let on that I held no grudge, and secretly plotted murder. No one knew of our childhood game. They'd never suspect a blind man of marksmanship. I thought of fingerprints, and wore gloves. I thought of the weapon, and used Willie's gun. I meant to put it back in his desk, but Mrs. Henderson heard the shot and came running faster than I figured she could. I stashed the gun temporarily in the hollow bust Mr. Conceit commissioned from a local ceramics teacher. How appropriate. The bullet in Willie's brain, the gun in Willie's head. I'll move it later, but for now, it's safely hidden from sight.

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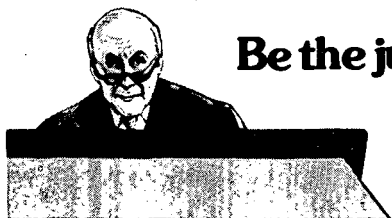
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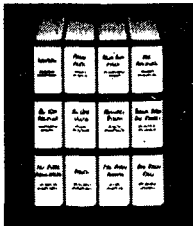
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